WAS CHRIST REALLY BORN OF A VIRGIN?

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WAS CHRIST REALLY BORN OF A VIRGIN?

Was Christ Really Born of a Virgin?

An Answer for Laymen

By T. H. Yardley, M.A.

Foreword by

The Rt. Rev. Charles Fiske, D.D.

Bishop of Central New York

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FOREWORD

By the Bishop of Central New York

The mass of Christian teachers who are denying the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, or minimizing its importance, seem to forget that according to the faith which has been held by the Church from the beginning, the birth of our Lord was miraculous whether He was Virgin-born or not. It seems to me that the present denials are really the result of indefinite thought as to the Person of Christ. Teachers who think they are teaching the Incarnation are really "Adoptionists". They have "exalted Christ into the realm of the divine", instead of proclaiming a Divine Saviour who came down to assume our humanity.

If the Church's faith is true, and the coming of Christ was an entrance into human life of an eternally pre-existing Personality, we have here something so without equal or likeness in the annals of men, that the traditional account of the manner of His entrance seems reasonable and natural. This is not to say that

the Virgin Birth establishes the Incarnation, or that we believe in the Deity of Christ because of the miraculous story of His birth. Rather, it means that because, through other experiences—through the wonder of His words and works, the sinlessness of His life, the perfection of His character, the depth of His love, the tremendous nature of His claims, His self-consciousness of Divinity—because through all this we have come to full faith in Christ as the Incarnate Son of God, we approach the story of His birth in such a spirit as to find it singularly in keeping with the Great Event of the advent of the Son into human life. Why hesitate at the lesser miracle, if we have accepted the greater miracle of the Incarnation itself? While belief in the Incarnation is not based upon belief in the Virgin Birth, the two are so congruous that a real Incarnation can hardly be thought of as taking place in any other manner.

We cannot imagine the fact being made known to the apostles until after their faith was established, any more than we can imagine our Lord abruptly announcing to them His Godhead. It was of the very essence of His method that the apostles should come slowly to their understanding of Him. He never would

tell them plainly who He was. They had to learn for themselves. Had the knowledge been thrust upon them, instead of gradually "sliding into their minds," the naturalness of their life with Him would have been lost and one purpose of the Incarnation defeated, in that they could not have had close fellowship with Him. It was not until after His resurrection that the full meaning of His life broke upon them. He was declared to be the Son of God with power by His victory over death.

Reading the story of Christ's life in this way, it is wonderfully simple and natural. The faith in which it issued is unlike anything men ever dreamed of before. And the story of its beginning is also beautiful in its simplicity, wonderfully and winsomely appealing in its sweetness and purity—utterly unlike any other so-called virgin birth myths. I am convinced that if once the whole meaning of the Great Life has been accepted, the story of its beginning will be found natural and any other birth unthinkable. And I am convinced that no definition of the faith except that which is expressed in the two great creeds can possibly explain the life itself.

I am glad to write this by way of an introduction to an essay on the Virgin Birth which

needs no apologetic preface. This brief essay can be read and understood by anyone who has given thought enough to the Christian faith to understand it at all. I hope the book may be put into the hands of laymen everywhere. It is wholly uncontroversial, free from charges of dishonesty and insincerity so frequently made against those who have not been able to accept the Gospel tradition. It is illuminating in its exposition of the essential connection between the fact of the Virgin Birth and faith in the Incarnation, and especially in its analysis of the striking congruity between the unique birth and the basic belief of Christians in the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is sympathetic of doubt and difficulty, patient of misunderstanding, yet the treatment has a warmth of faith and conviction that is most compelling. The treatment is scholarly and scrupulously fair, both in its investigation of the Gospel narratives and its consideration of their authenticity and in its separation of the central truth from all subsidiary questions. Best of all, the essay is profoundly reverent, as befits the discussion of a subject so intimate and delicate.

It has been a marvel to me in reading the manuscript, to find that the whole argument could be condensed into such small space and

yet be so readable and the treatment of the subject so "popular" and interesting. The little book meets a real need. I know no other treatise that quite fills its place.

CHARLES FISKE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

ANYONE who has read at all on the subject of this book will realize that there is nothing new in what I have to say. Indeed, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth has been so thoroughly covered by scholars that it is doubtful whether there can be anything new to say unless in the future some happy find may bring to light through manuscript or inscription new knowledge of our sources. The only originality of treatment which is possible at present would seem to lie in the matter of emphasis. I have tried to bring out in this way just those thoughts which appeal especially to myself and which I therefore feel may appeal to others who, like myself, can lay no claim to deep scholarship. After all, a technical vocabulary is not an essential to theological discussion. It would not be difficult, I suppose, to slip into the diction of New Testament criticism, to speak with seeming familiarity of the "Pauline" or "Johannine" stream of tradition, to surmise over the contents of the hypothetical (and some-

what Teutonic) "Q" Gospel, or to discuss the "Christology" of this or that school. But *cui bono?* My friends, the professional and business men generally and their wives, just want a plain tale. So far as one can reduce a fairly intricate subject to simple terms, I have tried to do so.

But I owe a deep debt to many writers of real learning—to more than I should be able to name—and, if I have borrowed their thoughts, as of course I have, I hereby tender them my gratitude. Perhaps to none do I owe quite so much as I do to Bishop Gore, whose writings have helped and inspired me for many years in the past and to whose lucid and reverent treatment of all that pertains to our Saviour's religion I hope to turn with pleasure as well as with profit in the years to come.

Above all, however, I am deeply grateful to my old friend and colleague Bishop Fiske, to whose kindly encouragement and only too favorable opinion I owe it that these brief suggestions on the tradition of the Virgin Birth have found their way to the printer.

TWO BOOKS OF AUTHORITY

In these days not a few people seem to be uncertain as to the truth of the virgin birth of Christ. With many, probably the great majority, the authority of the old traditional faith of Christendom means too much to permit them to doubt. But with others new factors are entering in to change their beliefs, or at least to make them question the validity of what their fathers held so implicitly. All the influence of a modern intellectual theology, all the present day reaction against the reality of miraculous happenings, all the vague but widespread distrust of the historical accuracy of the Bible, and, finally, all the popular setting forth of Jesus the man, rather than Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God, has had a most unsettling effect upon the faith of many sincere Christians, and especially, it would seem, upon their belief in the virgin birth of Christ. If, as is the case, some prominent and able ministers of the Gospel, in various churches, have openly denied a belief in the old Christmas

story of Bethlehem, is it any wonder that laymen, untrained in clear theological thinking, should in some cases find a certain kind of relief by dropping from their thoughts a tradition which seems to do violence to the most fundamental principles of physical life?

Under these circumstances it would be well for us all to understand very clearly the elementary reasons for still holding fast to a belief which seems to create so much difficulty. The churches prevailingly remain officially loyal to the truth expressed in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in. . . .Jesus Christ. . . .Conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary"; and yet their ministers and lay people are today challenging that truth in sufficient numbers to make it incumbent upon those who still hold faithfully to it to give a full, clear, and satisfactory answer to such questions as, Why do you believe in such an impossible thing? or, Why can I not accept Christ Himself without cumbering my belief with unnecessary and childish legends of the past? Undoubtedly the whole great Christmas story from the annunciation to the flight into Egypt —the visions of St. Joseph and St. Mary, the wonderful birth in the little town of Bethlehem, the angelic message to the shepherds, the

visit and adoration of the Magi, the escape from Herod—all of this is inexpressibly dear to multitudes of Christian hearts, and has served as the inspiration of many of the greatest works of poetry, music, and art for centuries past. But the beauty and tenderness of the story must not blind us to the necessity of establishing firmly its right to a place among the great fundamental truths of our religion. If the churches are to maintain their belief in the virgin birth of Christ they must establish that belief on reasonable grounds, and the laity must understand the vital connection which subsists between the manner of the birth of the Saviour and His place as the Divine Redeemer of mankind.

It is the purpose of this little book to place the whole matter before the laity in brief form and in as simple and untechnical language as possible, so that those who have never made a study of New Testament criticism may easily follow it. A complete and scholarly treatment of the subject will not be attempted. Even if I were equipped—as I am not—to enter the lists of critical controversy, a full and searching examination of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth would be superfluous, since some of the ablest scholars of modern times have brilliant-

ly defended that doctrine against the attacks of destructive critics. But if a reading of this short presentation of the subject should result in a further and detailed study of the various questions involved, then my labor will not have been in vain. For those who may desire to go more deeply into historical and critical subjects connected with the biblical accounts of our Lord's birth, a list of a few books bearing on these matters will be given at the close of this chapter.

It must, however, be clearly understood that scholarship cannot and does not attempt to do anything more than establish a strong presumption in favor of the reliability of the New Testament records. The life of our Lord, His words and deeds, and, above all, His character and personality, are of such a kind as to demand for their full comprehension a humble and reverent faith. We may say without hesitation that the virgin birth of Christ is a perfectly meaningless event apart from an unreserved acceptance of the Virgin's Son as God incarnate. There are those who profess to accept the miracle as a fact, but yet maintain that it is not related to the Divine plan of redemption. These are standing on very insecure ground. Their belief in the virgin birth must

rest solely upon the historical truth of the records. If those records are open to question on any grounds, then they have nothing else whatever to which they can appeal to vindicate their belief. We must have not only a reasonably sure historical basis for our belief in general, but also such a clear perception of the significance for us and for all men of the *divine personality* of the Son of Mary that our faith will reach out and grasp the meaning of things which would otherwise be incomprehensible. In other words, let us always remember that in the matter of Christian believing intellectual understanding is of far less importance than the exercise of a reasonable faith. Without the latter we can get nowhere at all. We must realize that there are indeed things which are hidden from the wise and prudent but which are revealed unto babes. I take it for granted that those who are sufficiently interested in the controversy over the virgin birth of Christ to read a simple defence of that doctrine will approach the subject from the standpoint of convinced believers in the divine personality of Christ. Otherwise, what I have to say can have no meaning at all for them.

Assuming, therefore, the existence of this underlying faith, let us go on to an inquiry into

the credentials of our documents, and ask what are the dates, authorship, and general trustworthiness of the two records from which our belief in the virgin birth originally comes.

These are questions over which New Testament criticism has busied itself for more than an hundred years. We need not follow the history of that criticism, but we shall do well to note that although there are wide divergencies of opinion among modern students of the Bible yet the general trend of judgment during the last quarter of a century has been away from the older destructive position and in the direction of the traditional view of the origins of the New Testament books. This is a great gain for the churches. The criticism of fifty or seventy-five years ago made serious inroads into the faith of Christendom, and the effects of the older attacks are probably being felt more today than ever before. The modernism of our own times is the logical result of the work of German and other biblical scholars who have long been dead, but many of whose radical teachings are still current. Critics often seem to feel that it is necessary to approach the subject of the Bible without one scintilla of that faith which, as we must maintain, is absolutely essential to a real comprehension of

the Bible's message. Possibly it is better so. Possibly it is better to subject the Gospels to a kind of post-mortem dissection. The resuscitation, under the influence of good scholarship and faith combined, becomes only the more manifest and convincing. Certainly no set of writings has ever been submitted to such a thorough and minute examination as have the books of the New Testament; and certainly the vindication which those books have received in recent years at the hands of not a few scholars of the first rank ought to be of the greatest encouragement to all of us who want to feel that we can really trust the Gospels' portraiture of the Saviour of the world. Scholarship is telling us, cautiously, but more clearly as the years go on, that those books of ancient times are authentic—just what they purport to be. But faith can help us to see that the only interpretation of their contents which is at once reasonable and satisfying is the old interpretation of the Church which gave us the books, namely, that God himself in His divine love and pity came into our life to share our experience and to die our death.

The two documents with which we are chiefly concerned are the Gospel according to St. Matthew and the Gospel of St. Luke.

With regard to the former, we shall be on safe ground if we take it as a compilation made by some unknown writer, probably a Jewish Christian, about the year 80; that it is based on the older Gospel of St. Mark, or preferably, upon some earlier lost document which itself was the source of St. Mark; and that it has incorporated into it the "Words of Christ" as traditionally coming from St. Matthew the Apostle. We may confidently take it as a thoroughly trustworthy source of knowledge about our Lord, resting ultimately upon the profound conviction of the "eye-witnesses of the Word". The character and personality of our Lord manifestly made a spiritual impression upon His disciples so deep and permanent that, as one of them described it, they could not but speak the things which they had seen and heard. Life meant just one thing for them: bearing witness to the Christ whom they had known. Their burning conviction of the truth quickly found expression in the first tradition of Christianity—whether oral or in writings—and thus became the sure foundation of all our knowledge of the life of Christ. (The reader should be warned not to confuse the word *tradition* with *myth* or *legend*. As used in connection with the sources of our knowledge of

Christ, *tradition* denotes the body of truth which was transmitted from the original eyewitness to groups of believers, whether by word of mouth or in written form.) The earliest tradition of the Gospel formed much of the substance of the "preaching" of the Apostles, which is so often referred to by St. Paul and other writers. I believe that the prevailing opinion of scholars today is that this tradition found expression in written forms at a very early date indeed. Certainly we know from St. Luke that before he wrote his Gospel many had taken in hand the writing down of all that Jesus had done and said. Of those primitive written forms of the tradition all have been irrevocably lost, but the probability would seem to be that their contents have been completely preserved in the Gospels of the New Testament and that we of today have been deprived of nothing which is essential to the portraiture of the Saviour. The Gospel according to St. Matthew may therefore be regarded as representing the ultimate form which a large part of the earliest tradition took at the hands of some unknown Jewish Christian who was deeply interested in the fulfilment of Hebrew prophecy in the person of our Lord. We may also say that in this Gospel are to be found the "logia"

or "words of Christ" as traditionally coming from the Apostle St. Matthew—whence the title of the book—and that it was compiled about half a century after the crucifixion, at a date when there were still some left of the original disciples of our Lord. The year 80 may, however, be too late a date for its composition. Professor Harnack in his *Date of the Acts and Synoptic Gospels* puts St. Matthew in "close proximity" to the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred in 70, and does not exclude an even earlier date. I do not feel, however, that the matter of a decade one way or the other makes any difference in its trustworthiness. This Gospel comes to us today with all the impressive authority of a record supported by the unimpeachable testimony of the first Christian witnesses, and gives us much of the actual teaching of our Lord in a form as nearly approximating his own words as is humanly possible. It needs only to be added that the first two chapters which narrate the birth of Jesus are unquestionably a part of the book as it originally appeared. Not only is there no evidence at all for supposing that they are a later addition, but there is every reason for supposing them to be the very oldest portion of the entire New Testament.

As regards the second book which contains an account of our Saviour's virgin birth, we may say without the slightest hesitation that it is the work of the man whose name it bears, St. Luke, the beloved physician, the companion and fellow traveler of St. Paul. Some critics still place the composition of this book as late as the year 80, or even later, but we shall be on very safe ground if we regard it as completed before the death of St. Paul, which took place about the year 67. St. Luke was a gentile and not one of the original circle of eye-witnesses, but he has proved himself to be an historian of the first rank, and the authority of his work is beyond all question.

So important in this brief treatment of the documents relating the birth of Christ are the standing and reliability of St. Luke as a careful and painstaking historian, that it would be well to notice one instance, closely related to our subject, in which the accuracy of St. Luke has been completely vindicated in fairly recent years. I refer to his statements in the three opening verses of the second chapter of his Gospel—those verses which tell of a universal census taken under Augustus when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. Not so many years ago each one of St. Luke's assertions in these verses

was dismissed by the critics as a mere fabrication, both false and clumsy. There could never have been an imperial census in Palestine at that time, for it was not a Roman province; Cyrenius was not governor of Syria until ten years later; and, finally, even if there had been a census it would not have been necessary for Joseph to leave his home in Nazareth to be enrolled, much less his wife. The whole story, according to the critics and according to some historians also, was inserted by St. Luke in order to bring the birth of the Christ into the town of Bethlehem and make it agree with ancient Hebrew prophecy. So St. Luke stood discredited, and his narrative, both in the Gospel and the Acts, was unreliable as history. Without going into the matter too deeply, we may now say that the tables have been completely turned and each statement of the Evangelist has been vindicated. Palestine was not, it is true, a Roman province at that time, but it was a subject kingdom, and the will of the Emperor in such a matter as a census was dominant. Cyrenius was twice Governor of Syria—both at the time we are considering, and later. And finally, it has now been proved that periodical enrollments of the provinces and subject kingdoms were the settled policy of the Empire be-

fore our Saviour's birth and for a long time afterward, and these enrollments often involved *the return of whole households to their native towns or districts*. The object of this policy seems to have been to prevent the scattering of native populations. A full treatment of this whole matter will be found in Sir William Ramsay's fascinating book, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*. St. Luke is an historian who, as he tells us in his prologue, looked carefully and conscientiously into his sources of information, and who wrote in order that his readers might know the *certainty* of those things in which they had been instructed. Like the Gospel according to St. Matthew, his work is based upon the oldest Gospel, St. Mark, or, better, upon the supposed source of St. Mark; but it bears every indication of most careful revision. Also, as in the case of St. Matthew, the first two chapters which relate the birth of Christ, are an integral part of the Gospel as it first appeared, and are to be dated far back in the earliest years of the life of the Church. There is not one particle of evidence, either in the narrative itself or from outside sources, for supposing them to have been a later addition.

So much, in very brief, we may say for the documentary standing of the two books which contain the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. That they are inspired writings, we most confidently believe and assert. That inspiration involves any suggestion of verbal infallibility is not for a moment to be considered in these days. Of course there are many inaccuracies and minor contradictions in the New Testament records, as is perfectly obvious. But such inaccuracies are very superficial; they do not in the least affect the essential truth of what was written; and their presence in the pages of the Gospels simply brings into clearer light the manifest good faith and unconscious integrity of the writers. We do contend, however, that the delineation of the character and personality of our Lord as given in the New Testament cannot possibly be the work of human imagination, but is the result of an inexpressibly profound conviction of truth implanted in the hearts and souls of the disciples by their daily contact with Jesus of Nazareth. Their conviction of the sinless character and superhuman personality of our Lord is the thing which lies closest of all to the heart of our religion. Finally and completely confirmed by the resurrection of Christ, and vitalized by the experience

of Pentecost, this conviction of the eye-witnesses becomes for us of this day, as it became for the Christians of the first century, the surest warrant we can have for the truth of the Gospel. It is a flame which communicates itself with undiminished brilliancy and potency wheresoever it touches human life—even over long centuries of time unto our own day. Skeptics can devise, and have devised, plausible explanations of nearly everything in the New Testament—denying the reality of the miraculous, picking to shreds the words of our Lord, paring away all the historical basis of the religion in which we believe, making Christ Himself but a myth—but, in the end, they are still confronted by this manifest and really awful conviction of truth in the minds and hearts of the writers of the New Testament—a conviction which is articulate on every page and which was so burned into the hearts of simple and obscure men as to transform them into pioneers of the most far-reaching and permanently forcible movement in the history of mankind. If we fail to catch something of this pristine conviction ourselves, then we have only the shadow, not the substance, of the truth, and we can depend upon nothing more certain than a kind of subjective idealized Christ. But if we

perceive and feel the reality of this conviction back of all that is written in the New Testament—if, by faith, we open our hearts to the intense power of the words of the writers—then we have a sure hold on truth; we have laid our foundations on a rock.

In the Gospel according to St. Matthew and the Gospel of St. Luke, though we have no reason for supposing that the writer of either book ever saw or heard our Lord, yet we find the flame of that earliest conviction burning with undiminished heat. Whatever meaning we may attach to "inspiration" in general, we cannot easily avoid the acknowledgment that those men wrote from an overmastering sense of reality and truth. We may therefore come to the stories which they give us of our Saviour's birth with a well grounded confidence in the integrity and responsibility of the writers—a confidence which will strongly predispose us to look seriously upon their narratives as at least based upon good authority and given in good faith, and not to reject them offhand as mere idle myths, easily accepted in a credulous age of the world but unworthy of consideration by intelligent and enlightened moderns.

Among the various books devoted to a defense of the virgin birth I would especially recommend the following:

A treatise in the volume called *Dissertations on Subjects Connected with the Incarnation,* by Bishop Gore.

The Virgin Birth of Christ, by Dr. James Orr, Free Church College, Glasgow.

The Virgin Birth of our Lord, by the Rev. Leonard Prestige, Oxford.

The Virgin Birth of Jesus, by the Rev. G. H. Box, King's College, London.

This last, a publication of very recent years, can hardly be excelled in its fair and reasonable presentment of the critical questions involved, or in its reverent sympathy with the theological bearing of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth.

In Dr. Orr's valuable work will be found an appendix containing excerpts from a number of important papers by some of the ablest modern scholars, showing how strong is the testimony in behalf of the trustworthiness of the documents.

A great many other books and articles upon our subject have been published during the last half century, but they are far too numerous to

name. Among them, however, I would suggest as most valuable and helpful the chapters devoted to the Virgin Birth in the writings of that revered and profound American scholar, the late Dr. Charles F. Briggs.

II

THE BIRTH STORIES

It is always of interest to ask concerning those who have made a name and position for themselves in the world, when and where were they born, and who were their parents? Now it is the simple fact that the answers to all such questions concerning Him whose position in human life is that of unquestioned moral and spiritual supremacy are to be found in only two very brief passages of very ancient date. Whatever we know about the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ comes from the opening chapters of those two Gospels which we have been considering, St. Matthew and St. Luke. No one is competent to assert anything whatever concerning the Nativity which is not contained in those two passages. For example, many critics have maintained that Christ was born in Nazareth instead of in Bethlehem; but their contention not only contradicts the record but also is de-

void of the slightest direct evidence. We all have the privilege of disbelief. We are under no compulsion to accept the Evangelists' accounts of Christ's birth as true. But, on the other hand, we must remember that we have no other source of information concerning that birth save those Evangelists. In any discussion of the virgin birth, therefore, this fact raises the two passages in which it is related to a position of first importance.

It will be convenient and instructive to have before our eyes for reference and comparison at least that part of each passage which concerns our subject most closely. I will use the Revised Version of the New Testament for the sake of accuracy, and put the two accounts in parallel columns.

St. Matthew 1:18 to end	St. Luke 1:26 to 39
Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When his mother, Mary, had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But when he thought on these things, behold an angel of the Lord	Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came in unto her and said, Hail thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee. But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and cast in her mind what man-

ST. MATTHEW 1:18 to end

(*Continued*)

appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for it is he that shall save his people from their sins. Now all this is come to pass, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet saying,

> Behold the virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, And they shall call his name Immanuel;

which is, being interpreted, God with us. And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took unto him his wife; and knew her not until she had brought forth a son; and he called his name Jesus.

ST. LUKE 1:26 to 39

(*Continued*)

ner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God. And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. And Mary said unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee; wherefore also that which is to be born shall be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elisabeth thy kinswoman, she also hath conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her that was called barren. For no word from God shall be void of power. And Mary said, Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.

The first question to ask concerning these crucial passages is, are they authentic parts of the Gospels in which they appear? Could they not be regarded as later interpolations?

Until the invention of printing in the 15th century all copies of the Bible, as of everything else in literature, were of course in manuscript form. There are a great many manuscripts of the Bible in existence—about two thousand, it is said. Some, called *uncials,* in round capital letters, are very ancient, two going back to the fourth century. Others, of a later date, called *cursives,* in a running hand, are often of great value to the student as being accredited copies of more ancient manuscripts. Besides these Greek manuscripts there are very old versions of the New Testament in other languages—notably, Latin, Syriac, and Egyptian. Furthermore, we have voluminous quotations of the Scriptures found in the writings of the earliest Christian authors, and also the *lectionaries,* or passages of scripture used in the old liturgies. Altogether, it is a well stocked storehouse of information concerning the true text of the New Testament, to which we have access in these ways, and we may rest assured that what we read today in our Revised Version

is substantially what Christians read in Greek in the earliest ages of the Church. And the verdict of the old manuscripts concerning the authenticity of the birth narratives in St. Matthew and St. Luke is unanimous. Without exception among the uncials, cursives, and versions, all bear testimony to the fact that those narratives are integral parts of the Gospels in which they are found. One old Latin cursive of high authority has a curious change in St. Luke's narrative, omitting verse 34 of the 1st chapter and inserting verse 38 in its place. I mention this only for the sake of exactness. The change does not modify the unanimity of the verdict. So far as documentary evidence is concerned, the fact that our Lord was born of a Virgin mother is as truly attested as is the fact that He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Those critics who still maintain that the birth narratives were late interpolations, put in for doctrinal reasons, are assuming something for which there is not one shred of evidence and which is contradicted by all the impressive testimony of the entire array of manuscripts in existence.

Taking, then, these perfectly attested stories of our Saviour's birth, which are textually on a

par with everything else in the New Testament, what can we say in general of their qualities and characteristics?

In the first place, I think it must be evident to all that these birth narratives purport to relate something which actually occurred; in other words, they are plainly not allegorical. Whoever first wrote those little accounts manifestly believed that what they wrote was literally true and naturally expected their readers to take it all in that sense. There is not the slightest suggestion of symbolism or of allegory to be found in either narrative. As is the case throughout the first three Gospels in general, so here, the style is perfectly simple and direct. Furthermore, there is a manifest artlessness in the writing, which, under other circumstances—I mean, apart from the miracle which is related—would undoubtedly disarm all criticism and invalidate any suggestion of ulterior motive. This perfect disingenuousness of the writers is well illustrated by their unconscious freedom in using the word "father" when referring to St. Joseph, and in speaking of "parents" as well. Critics sometimes argue that the employment of these terms actually contradicts the plain assertions of the miraculous conception; but such an objection has no

weight whatever, and, indeed, reacts against the critics who make it. If the writers of the narratives had shown a meticulous carefulness in the choice of words, scrupulously avoiding any reference to St. Joseph as father of the Child, we might have some ground for suspecting them of insincerity or of fabricating the whole story. St. Joseph was "father" of the Child in a legal sense and by common belief and consent—although St. John plainly hints at scandal existing during our Lord's manhood. He was "father" for the protection and support of both mother and baby. We may suppose that he thought of himself as "father" to Jesus, even though he knew perfectly well that the little Child was a direct gift from God. We shall do well to look upon such phraseology as we find here as perfectly natural and as true to historical and psychological principles. Our narratives, then, plainly give the effect of stories told by men who were so completely assured of the truth of what they were telling that they were not in the least troubled by backward thoughts as to the credibility of their tales in the minds of their readers.

Then, again, notice that the two accounts are completely independent of each other. They both tell the same central fact, but they tell it

not only in utterly different language but also from entirely different sources of information. As has often been pointed out for centuries past, and as is perfectly obvious from a comparison of just the short parts which have been quoted here, St. Matthew's account of the Saviour's birth reads like the story of St. Joseph himself, while that of St. Luke seems to be the story of St. Mary. At least we may say this, that, assuming for the moment that the narratives relate actual truth, the facts which are given as to the thoughts in the hearts of those concerned and the words to the angels could have come only from St. Joseph in the one case and from St. Mary in the other. There would be no other possible sources of the information. This is a point of great interest in itself, but for the present I would merely suggest its bearing on the theory that the story of the virgin birth is of legendary origin. The two accounts are so different that the supposition that they are simply two versions of one and the same early legend would seem very difficult to entertain. If the whole story were only legendary or mythical—and that, of course, is the theory of most of the opposing critics—then we should have *two completely independent legends,* clearly of independent or-

igin, of exactly the same event! The two legends would touch each other only at two points —the virginity of the mother and the birth in Bethlehem. In all the details and especially in the manifestly opposite sources of information, they would diverge so completely as to make the legend theory extremely hard to explain. It is perfectly possible to conceive of Christ-legends appearing at a very early date, and, indeed, as we shall see later on, there actually were such legends in plenty in the late first century and second century. Also, we ought to be ready to admit that legendary matter might have found its way into the body of the Gospels without the writers being aware of its character. But that one and the same basic legend should assume such utterly different forms as we find in St. Matthew and St. Luke involves such a degree of deliberate fraud on the part of the writers as is inconsistent with the qualities of the narratives which we are considering. If there had been only *one* narrative, say that of St. Matthew, then a legend theory would be not so hard to understand; but when you add St. Luke's entirely different and independent account, then the theory becomes a poser. But, if we assume for the time that the story is true to fact, all the differences in

the accounts given by the foster-father and the virgin mother are perfectly comprehensible, and in the end become congruous. In other words, to sum this matter up, if we ignore for the present the difficulty of belief in the miraculous, the two accounts which we have of our Saviour's birth give us, on purely internal evidence, the strongest reason for looking for their source in *fact,* not in legend.

Another characteristic of both accounts is their primitive and Jewish tone. They read almost like bits from the Old Testament. As some of the ablest adverse critics themselves maintain, they are probably the most archaic writings in the New Testament. Not only are they clearly of Jewish origin, but they belong to that element of Judaism which best represented the old and finest traditions of Hebrew life. The prologue of St. Luke, the first four verses, is written in good literary Greek of the period; but from those opening verses we pass immediately into a very different language, and into scenes and into the presence of people strongly suggestive of a much earlier day in Israel. We find a little group of men and women of deep faith and pure devotion, constant in prayer and attendance at the Temple, always full of hope for the fulfilment of God's prom-

ises of redemption, living in quietness and peace and love. The atmosphere and environment suggested in St. Matthew and St. Luke are full of charm and beauty, but the old Hebraic flavor of the narratives is also a matter of great importance to bear in mind in a study of our subject, as we shall see when we come to consider the theory of gentile influence in the development of a birth legend. We need only to note for the present, that, whether legendary or based on fact, the story of the Saviour's birth springs only out of Jewish soil, and that it was a growth of the very earliest years in the life of the little Christian-Hebrew group in Palestine.

Again, let us notice that the birth narratives are devoid of theological tone or teaching. It has been supposed by some critics that they were used by the writers of the first and third Gospels in order to reënforce the doctrine of our Lord's Divinity; but, apart from the fact that neither of those Gospels is in itself theological, except by implication, the characteristics of the birth narratives do not easily lend themselves to dogmatic use. The narratives *tell* —that is all—though they tell with a delicacy, reserve, simplicity, and beauty that are not far from being marks of inspiration in themselves.

It is true that we find in them such expressions as, "King of the Jews", "Son of the Most High", "A Saviour which is Christ, the Lord", yet I think it would be difficult to derive the doctrine of our Lord's Divinity from such phraseology. As compared with the language of St. John's Gospel or the epistles of St. Paul, such expressions seem devoid of any definite theological import. If, as has been suggested, the narratives were introduced later in order to strengthen the doctrine of the Incarnation, as that doctrine was gradually developed and perceived in the Church, at any rate it seems impossible that they could have been *written* with a view to that doctrine, or any other teaching.

Finally, these narratives show not a trace of ascetic feeling. Among the Jews, before and after our Saviour's birth, and among Christians of the second century and later, there were strongly marked ascetic movements in which celibacy was practised and virginity was accounted as of higher moral worth than marriage. There is, however, none of this feeling in our narratives, although certain modern writers have thought that the story of the virgin birth owes its existence to the influence of a growing asceticism in certain parts of the

Church. I do not think that the theory has many supporters, and it is, of course, quite at variance with the tone and characteristics of the birth narratives. Let me say with all reverence that there is not a hint in either of the Gospel stories which could possibly suggest that doctrine so dear to later Christian thought, namely, the perpetual virginity of St. Mary. One may believe that doctrine on other grounds, but the tradition on which it may be based or the instinct which seems to require it does not appear in the New Testament accounts of the Nativity. There is no exaltation of virginity to be found in either record. Among the great mass of the Jewish people "Marriage was honorable and the bed undefiled", and no other feeling than this can be detected in the birth narratives. However we may explain the reason for the birth of Jesus Christ apart from normal human generation, it has nothing at all to do with any supposed moral or spiritual excellence connected with the virginal condition. It is not because a virgin birth is more seemly than a natural birth that the New Testament stories came into being or that orthodox theology today is loyal to the old belief. Although the Evangelists do relate a stupendous miracle, yet their tone is

normal and wholesome. The reason for the miracle is to be explained on quite other grounds than by a supposed special fitness or propriety in being a virgin rather than a married woman.

There are many other features of the narratives which it would be interesting to consider, such as the two and very different genealogies, the omission in St. Matthew of the first residence in Nazareth, the omission in St. Luke of the flight into Egypt, and other details; but space forbids a full discussion of the various questions which are connected with our subject. The two accounts are so very different that at first sight it may seem impossible to reconcile them with each other. But, with a little study, it will be found that they can be harmonized perfectly; and ultimately it will be seen that the marked differences between the two testify clearly to the good faith of the writers, rule out all thought of collusion, and make it extremely difficult, to say the least, to account for the narratives by referring them to a legendary origin.

III

MIRACLES

"To be in sympathy with a narrative of this kind is especially difficult for us moderns of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." So wrote the great Adolf Harnack, Professor of Church History in the University of Berlin; and his words reveal the chief and age-old objection to the New Testament account of the Saviour's birth. For that birth was a miracle. More even than the resurrection does the birth of Christ seem to contradict the inflexible law of nature as we know it; for, while the resurrection may be thought of as a great victory of life itself, the virgin birth appears to set aside the very principle of the origin of life. It is of no value to point to the wide prevalence of virgin birth in nature—parthenogenesis, as it is called—and to argue, as some have done, that this is simply one of nature's own ways of reproduction. What is true of lower forms of life has nothing to do with man. The virgin birth was

a special act of God, and we make a grave mistake if we try to reconcile it with anything in man's experience. Indeed, we may say that it would have no spiritual value unless it did find its place in a sphere apart from our experience.

Certain New Testament students who have written at much length on the subject of miracles make a distinction between what is "supernatural" and what is"miraculous". The life of God, and, to some, the person of our Saviour, belong to the supernatural sphere. There are even events of the present day which, according to some writers, would be regarded as supernatural—such as psychic phenomena, "spiritualistic" happenings, and the cure of nervous disorders by faith. Miracles, however, are not *super*-natural, but *contra*-natural, and therefore not to be thought of as realities. Many of the healings recorded as done by our Lord, such as the cure of a paralytic, are supernatural acts, at least based on fact, and therefore believable. Other of the healings, such as giving sight to the blind, and all the nature miracles, like the stilling of the tempest, are contrary to nature and therefore not believable. The virgin birth and the resurrection would come under the head of "miracles"—impossible and incredible things.

Such a distinction appears to me invalid and fallacious. What do we really know of natural law? Each year we live seems to bring new knowledge of an ever widening sphere of nature, and to suggest the need of a revision of the earlier theories and conclusions of science. Some things which would have been "miraculous" to people fifty years ago are every day matters now. If we admit the existence of supernatural life, if we confess to a belief in God, what right have we to say where the natural ends, or how far the supernatural may overspan our experience? Is it not truer and more reasonable to think of the supernatural as the all-embracing realm, including what we call nature within itself? Is not this the thought which lies back of St. Paul's well-known words to the Athenians, "For in him we live and move and have our being"? What we call natural law, or the course of nature, may be thought of as simply the orderly but incomplete expression of supernatural law in a limited existence, an existence which is sure to pass away. What we call miracles, therefore, are not necessarily against nature, but are temporary manifestations in the limited life of men of the greater enfolding supernatural life—a life so much vaster, so much more permanent than what we

know by experience, that it may be thought of as the normal rather than the abnormal.

Viewed in this way the virgin birth and the resurrection are not really *contrary* to nature, but rather are proofs of a larger nature than our limited knowledge lets us understand. If I speak of the virgin birth as a stupendous miracle, it is simply in recognition of the unfathomable life surrounding us—a life from which there flowed to produce that birth a power which is not contrary to natural law, but which came to aid natural law; not to set nature aside, but to bring nature nearer God.

But such thoughts as these make little impression upon a materialistic age. The chief reason for the modern repudiation of the old belief that our Lord Jesus Christ had no earthly father is that for the most part the modern world shakes its head when asked to believe a miracle. It would, of course, be impossible in a little book like this to go thoroughly into all of the many ideas brought up by a consideration of this subject of the supernatural, but there are a few thoughts which I should like to suggest to those whose minds are troubled as to the credibility of the wonders related in the New Testament—and I think that means a great many people in every denomination at

this present time. We read of our Lord turning water into wine, feeding a host on a few loaves and fishes, healing lepers, giving sight and hearing to the blind and deaf, and three times bringing back the dead to life. A minister of the radical school writes that a certain type of mind "sincerely believes that these abnormal events actually occurred simply because the text of the New Testament says so." Some of us may be pardoned for feeling that the authority of the New Testament rests upon a sure and tried foundation; but we do not want to leave the matter so. We do not want to let the sneer pass and weakly admit that our faith has no reasonable basis.

Probably the first thought which occurs to most people when they consider the prevalence of modern doubt is that the whole difficulty arises from a conflict between science and religion. I feel that this is a mistake. There is no necessary conflict between science and religion. Each has its own field of activity, and each occupies a different sphere from the other. Science takes no cognizance whatever of the source of the universe, but concerns itself solely with those things in the universe which it can reach and study and understand. Of what is manifestly beyond its reach it has nothing

either to affirm or to deny. It would not be *scientific* if it did! Of course, a great many modern scientists would utterly repudiate any belief in miracles—would not give the question of belief in miracles even a moment's thought—would regard the whole matter as preposterous—and this for a reason which I shall presently suggest. On the other hand, there are not a few well recognized and able scientists who have not hesitated to confess a full belief in the Christian religion with all which that implies of acceptance of the New Testament record as a whole. I may name two or three examples among those who are no longer living. There was Professor George Romanes, one of the foremost biologists of modern times, a man on whose shoulders fell a goodly share of the mantle of the great Darwin. The special value in the example of Romanes lies in the fact that he embraced the Christian religion after a whole life of agnosticism, working his way gradually through the obscuring clouds of unbelief into the clear light of faith. There was St. George Mivart, prominent and distinguished as a naturalist. He was a devout Catholic. There was Lord Kelvin, one of the most brilliant scientists of modern days, famous as a leader and high authority among physicists;

also, one of the staunchest and most outspoken believers in orthodox Christianity who have ever lived. And there have been many others, and are many others today. I have been told that at a meeting of scientists in this country not many years ago, a list of over an hundred recognized scientists was read, every one of whom was a professed believer in the religion of our Lord. The roll is an honorable one and long. No one can rightly sneer at the "credulity" of such men. Their example simply goes to show that in the mind of a man of intellect and education there is room enough to hold two different things—the truths and hypotheses of science, and the revelation of God in the Bible. We may absolutely dismiss from our minds the notion that these things are in conflict with each other. The probability is that the leading spokesmen in the field of science would be the last of all to admit that anything is "impossible."

But if science in itself creates no obstacle to a belief in miracles, it is otherwise with what we may call *reason*. Going far back into the classic days of Greek life, we shall find developed a system of Stoic philosophy which has exercised a strong influence upon leading thinkers of every nationality down to our own day. Ac-

cording to this philosophy the universe is a fixed and unchangeable system controlled solely by the principle of cause and effect. Nothing from without—such as we would call an act of God—can invade this sphere to modify it or to divert for a moment the operation of its laws. Nothing can disarrange the inevitable course of its processes. It is "closed." Miracles do not and cannot take place. They are unthinkable. God does not exist as a personal Being or as a free determining force. If God be conceived of at all, it is as completely identified with nature —impersonal, pantheistic, devoid of will, purpose, and feeling. The world, as we know it, of ocean, mountain, forest, bird, beast, and man, passes through its steadily succeeding cycles of age following age, day and night, winter and summer, tempest and calm, feeding and growth, birth and death, in inexorable conformity with the principles which have controlled its development for untold millions of years, since the sun and planets were but a whirling nebular mist. Existence does not call for explanation. It is. Given the fact of physical matter in any form, and the principles of energy, molecular change, gravitation, and the like, account with mathematical precision for all the phenomena of life. The birth of a human child points inevitably to

a union of man and woman. Such a tale as the evangelists tell may be gently dismissed as only poetry or a dream.

It is probable that few of us are consciously influenced by this rigid system of thought, but I believe that practically all Western civilization is to a greater or less degree under its spell. The interests of our time favor a strongly material view of life. Certainly to active students of science such a philosophy as I have sketched must appeal as a most plausible and reasonable basis of thought; because in any special field—say chemistry—the student does actually find that there is no deviation in nature's steps. Given pure iron and moisture, and rust doth corrupt. This is why I said above that many scientists today find no room in their minds for the supernatural. Their unvarying experience would seem necessarily to rule out all but the normal processes of nature. And I believe that this view of the universe has a stronger hold upon the imagination of men in our day than ever before.

We cannot answer this philosophy except by saying that we do not and cannot believe it. There is no debating the issue between those who believe in a personal and righteous God and those who give intellectual worship to a

deity which is simply mechanical, impersonal nature. Some light may come to us, however, while we are trying to solve the deep problem of existence, by remembering that in the final analysis, however unchangeable nature may seem, man himself is free. In spite of the awful power of heredity, environment, and habit, deep in man's spiritual nature lies the inexpressible gift of choice. And, when choice is exercised, for good or ill, then man's physical, outward action is determined. In other words, man, who is certainly a part of nature, is not simply the helpless effect of blind, impersonal cause, but, at least in his moral life, far transcends nature and controls nature and subdues nature, introducing into that "closed," immutable system a new thing, a determining force—the will of a free being. If this be true of man, who is a part of nature, how much truer must it be of the God in whom we believe, in whom we live and move and have our being—the God who vivifies as well as transcends nature?

The connection between the above thought and what we may perhaps call our intellectual privilege of believing in miracles, lies in this: Man, by the selfish exercise of his free choice, has introduced into the universe a malign and destructive element—what we call sin. He has

disrupted and disarranged the orderly and beneficent course of a good world as designed by the Creator. Let us not hesitate to say that in a perfectly true sense he has successfully thwarted God's plan. And to what an awful extent the ravages of human selfishness and cruelty have invaded all organic life, plant and animal as well as human, it is almost impossible to conceive. The sciences of medicine and biology shed much light upon this matter, but they do not touch upon the moral injury which man is constantly inflicting, and which, in its turn, changes for worse the very face of the earth. Is it unreasonable to suppose that God in His free life as the vivifier of the natural world should, at least at great crises in the affairs of men, intervene to assert the moral supremacy of His will? If nature itself is controlled by order and law, if the essence of the Divine life be characterized by order and law, then, when the moral order and law of the world are foully broken by selfishness, can we suppose that He whose Name is Love, He who we believe gives life to all, will not on supreme occasions exert His power to restore the balance and to give assurance of the supremacy of His righteousness? Such intervention would necessarily be most exceptional, otherwise the inexpressible value of human

righteousness as the result of man's own choice would be lost. But there have been times, perhaps are times now in individual life, when evil has become so intense that the best efforts of righteous men become benumbed and impotent. The culmination of human evil may be thought of as reached in the crucifixion. Does not that cry aloud to God for nothing short of the resurrection?

I am conscious of the extreme difficulty of this line of reasoning, and know that it would take far more space than can be given in this small book to treat it at all adequately. Bishop Gore, in Chapters 9 and 10 of *Belief in God,* gives a most masterly and impressive discussion of the whole matter. I cannot do better than earnestly recommend those who are interested in what is so fundamental to our religion to read the whole volume. In particular, we ought to give careful heed to what Bishop Gore has to say upon the inveterate prejudice which exists among men as the result of the present dominance of purely material thinking. No search for truth can be successful if it be compromised at the very start by prejudice. Such a method is not *scientific.*

We come next to another consideration in our study of the problem of miracles—and I

feel that is a matter of the greatest importance. If we are to place any confidence in the Gospel's message, if we are to believe in the historic Christ, we must be ready to admit that miracles are a part of the very warp and woof of the Gospels. In all the four records our Lord is represented as doing wonders all the time. Supernatural power is there set forth as characteristic of His nature—inherent in it. Detailed accounts of miracles are so inextricably woven into the very stuff of the Gospels that we cannot get them out without rending the fabric of the message. What remains after we cut the supernatural out from the evangelists' story is too meager and disconnected to offer any reasonable basis for belief. Critics have tried to do this very thing—have rejected every item of the miraculous deeds of Christ, denying the virgin birth *in toto,* explaining away the healings as the result of helping people who imagined they were ailing, denying the fact of the empty tomb and reducing the resurrection to a psychological consciousness of an abiding spiritual presence—whatever that may mean. The resulting Jesus of the critics is too vague and shadowy a figure to make any impression upon the heart and conscience of the world. If it be objected that we still have Christ's words and teaching and sub-

lime character, I would say that I am not at all sure we have *anything* left after the modern editors have finished their improved version of the four ancient records. Certainly we have not always His words left in any recognizable form; for these are often so closely connected with the miracles that when the latter are excised the words begin to tumble, too. Think for a moment how complete is the association in the records between our Lord's words and His deeds. Few passages in the New Testament are of greater spiritual interest than the discourse on the Bread of Life in St. John vi. But the discourse is based entirely on the miracle of the great feeding, told in the same chapter, and opens with a reference to that miracle in so many words. Eliminate the miracle, and what becomes of the discourse? Or, take the Sermon on the Mount. The reason for the gathering of the multitude, from whom our Lord withdrew into the mountain, was the fame of His miracles which had spread throughout all Syria; and, "when he was come down from the mountain", the very first thing that is recorded is the healing of a leper. Or, again, what are we going to do with the perennially vital declaration, "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth. . .," etc., if we reject the raising of

Lazarus? Over and over again we shall find the best known sayings of Christ are practically a part of the miracles which He performed. His teaching about the sabbath, the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, His calling of the Twelve, His reiterated "Thy faith hath saved thee," all come to us in the closest conjunction with acts of supernatural power. In the sixth chapter of St. Luke we read of a great multitude of people from Judea and the seacoast who thronged about Him. Why did they come? "To hear Him *and to be healed of their diseases.*" The two things, Christ's words and Christ's miracles, are linked in the Gospels in a natural and indissoluble union. They belong to each other.

But the effect upon the integrity of the Gospel records which results from a general elimination of the miracles goes much farther. The distrust which is engendered by such a refusal to credit the value of the evangelists' testimony in one matter very naturally and logically extends to other matters. Representatives of the modernistic school of interpreters are far from being in close agreement with each other in their final conclusions; but their tendency is manifest—and is perfectly reasonable from their standpoint—and that tendency is to inject the element of doubt into the whole story of

Jesus Christ as it is presented in the New Testament. The authenticity of a large share of Christ's sayings and teaching has been questioned and disputed, now by one group of writers, now by another. Record is compared with record, differences of phraseology are ascribed to the individual bias of the writers, discourses, parables, prayers, all are found so full of glosses that what our Lord really said is left most uncertain, and almost any statement or phrase which can be accounted for by the later development of Christian doctrine is ruled out from the Gospel tradition. There is "very weak evidence" for the authenticity of the baptismal formula—Christ never thought or spoke of Himself as the Son of God—the prayer, "Our Father," is not necessarily authentic, all references to the destruction of Jerusalem belong to a period after the year seventy—the whole account of the passion and crucifixion is full of legendary matter—and so on. Even our Saviour's sinless character is not spared, for the baptism indicates penitence for wrong done in the past, and specific instances of moral imperfection are cited. That Christ Himself was but a beautiful myth would seem to be the logical end—and there are not wanting advocates of even this theory.

It must not be supposed from all this that criticism of the New Testament is to be deprecated. Far from it. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the long, patient, and scholarly labors of New Testament critics for many years past, even though oftentimes their conclusions have not seemed warranted. The work which has been done during the last fifty years and more in the Church history of the first centuries is of the very highest importance to an understanding of our origins. Moreover, some of the most distinguished and scholarly critics have done valiant work in behalf of the faith set forth by St. John and St. Paul—the faith in our Lord as "God of God," divine and eternal in His person. Neither must it be supposed that verbal infallibility is for a moment claimed any longer for the Bible in any of its books. It is obvious that there are minor inaccuracies and contradictions in the different records. Such imperfections do not in the least impair the integrity of the Gospel narrative as a whole or weaken its authority, but rather testify to the sincerity and independence of the writers. On the other hand, we may say without the slightest hesitation that certain presuppositions of the radical critics during the last century are insurmountable barriers to a real understanding of what the evan-

gelists had to tell. Those presuppositions are, in brief, that miracles are impossible and that Christ was only human. The records will not stand the strain of these two underlying conceptions of the advanced school of critics. Under the weight of these radical axioms the Gospels fall to pieces.

Finally, it must be remembered that not only is the Gospel record filled full from beginning to end with specific and detailed accounts of miracles, but also that our Lord himself is presented to us as a living miracle of goodness. In the moral sphere He comes to us as the embodiment of a positive, militant righteousness so utterly different not only in degree but in kind from anything found before or since in the human race, that it may be said to supervene the natural law of the life of men. We recognize in Him not only innocence, but an active source of moral strength for the entire race. The virgin birth was the beginning of a life lived completely on a superhuman level. On the score that that birth violates the law of nature there is no more reason for rejecting it than there is for rejecting the sinlessness of Christ or the positive perfections of His humanity. Indeed, we may say that of the two things, the physical and the moral miracle, the latter is the greater

wonder. That human nature should be found in any individual life as not only always and successfully antagonistic to every form of evil, but also in itself as uninterruptedly creative of the highest good, is something which we must recognize as transcending all our notions of what is possible to man. Such, however, is the human nature of our Lord as portrayed in the Gospel pages—a miracle of moral power, utterly unknown in the experience of men.

IV

THE "SILENCE"

It must not be supposed that the virgin birth of Christ will ever be an easy thing for men in general to believe. Even if the fact of the New Testament miracles as a whole be established on reasonable grounds, still there is in the miracle of Christ's birth an element which makes it especially difficult to accept, for there is nothing which is quite so rudimentary in human experience and in racial instinct as is the normal process of the beginning of human life. A religious tradition which starts by eliminating human fatherhood from the productive causes of the life of a child cuts too deeply into the primal consciousness of untold generations of men to permit it to stand without the most vehement protest and opposition. And so we must expect that whatever might be thought of as weakening the validity of the primitive tradition as we have it in St. Matthew and St. Luke, will always be brought forward and em-

phasized by those who discredit the virgin birth.

Now, apart from the question of miracles in general, the most serious objection urged against the truth of the Gospel narratives is this: that nowhere in all the New Testament is the virgin birth of our Lord told or referred to excepting in the few verses from the evangelists which we have considered. Everywhere else the whole matter is utterly ignored. Why, it is asked, is there such a remarkable and unanimous silence on the part of all the other writers if such an amazing miracle had occurred or even if it were supposed to have occurred? The objection sounds like a reasonable one, and it must be sufficiently answered.

On general grounds we may say that there was no compelling reason for referring to the circumstances of the birth of Christ at all in any of the books from which it is omitted. St. Mark's Gospel—the oldest—simply gives the substance of the apostles' teaching—that is, the ministry of Christ from the baptism to the ascension. St. John's Gospel—by much the latest—is supplementary. It does not repeat the contents of the other three excepting in the case of the great feeding and in connection with the closing scenes. So far as St. Paul and the other

epistle writers are concerned, they do not profess to narrate events at all. Their interest lies in an interpretation and application of the life of Jesus. Moreover, we may say that the fact of the virgin birth was a matter of such intimate, delicate nature, hardly to be spoken of at first, that there is little likelihood of its having been known at all, outside of a very limited group, until it was revealed by the evangelists. It could hardly have formed a part of the apostolic preaching, and was manifestly not the source of the deep conviction of the eyewitnesses as to the character and true nature of our Lord's being. The realization of who and what our Lord was came with the growing consciousness of His character and work and message. The wonderful nature of His birth, known originally to only two persons in the world, emerged at last in the gently, almost shyly, told story which we have today. To say that it must have been known to St. John and St. Paul seems to me almost self-evident; but it does not follow that they would use it in their writings to the churches. As compared with the character of Jesus, declared by apostolic witness, and with the great public proclamation of divine approval involved in the resurrection, the virgin birth of Christ was on another plane—too

sacred, too intimately knit with a holy woman's life, to be used in preaching or in controversy.

It is not by any means certain, however, that the silence of the New Testament writers in general is quite so profound as is usually thought to be the case.

We can say, to begin with, that there is nothing in any of the books which can be twisted into a denial of the virgin birth or into an assertion of human paternity. I have already spoken of the perfectly natural use of the words "father" and "parents" in the birth narratives themselves. In addition to this, we ought to notice just four other instances of similar language—St. Matthew xiii, 55; St. Luke iv, 22; St. John i, 45; and St. John vi, 42. These all speak of our Lord as the son of Joseph or the son of the carpenter; but it is to be noted that these passages are by no means assertions of an earthly parentage, but are merely the quoted words of neighbors or of a future disciple, indicative of the current belief at the time they were spoken that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary. St. Luke, at the opening of his genealogy, states this current belief in so many words: "And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (*as was supposed*) the son of Joseph, which was the son of Heli,"

etc. It was a supposition which, we may be sure, St. Mary herself would be by no means desirous of correcting in a public way. St. Joseph was no longer living. The passages which speak of Christ as the "son of David" call for only a little consideration. St. Joseph was, of course, of the house and lineage of David; but even if St. Mary were not of that same line—as is uncertain—the position of Jesus as legal or putative son of Joseph entitled Him to the use of the cognomen "Son of David." The phrase is in no way inconsistent with the virgin birth.

In addition to this negative side of the case there are certain expressions and allusions in the New Testament which are in striking harmony with the tradition of the virgin birth. I will instance what seems to me the most significant of these passages.

Take, first, St. Mark's Gospel—the earliest. Each of the other evangelists begins with some reference to what we may call antecedents. In St. Matthew, it is the experience of St. Joseph. In St. Luke, it is the birth of St. John Baptist. In St. John, we have the eternal pre-existence of our Lord as the "Word." St. Mark begins with the baptism; but note well his opening words: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." I would not for a moment

maintain that this language even suggests the virgin birth, although, in the position in which it occurs it is strongly reminiscent of the angel's words to the Virgin Mary; but, bearing in mind this expression, "Son of God," at the very opening of the Gospel, let the reader compare it with another and apparently deliberate choice of words on the part of St. Mark. As we have already noticed, neither St. Matthew nor St. Luke, though each had definitely told of the virgin birth in clearest language, hesitated to use the word "father" of St. Joseph, or to quote others as speaking of the "son of Joseph," or, "son of the carpenter." St. Mark, on the other hand, appears unwilling to use such language even in quotation, for, in the parallel passage, he adopts instead this expression: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" He does not, indeed, use the name of Joseph once in his Gospel. Now this is a very striking fact, for the almost invariable Hebrew usage is to name the father rather than the mother. "Jesus Bar-joseph," would be the expected form. Oddly enough, it was certain German radical critics of a good many years ago who seized upon this usage of St. Mark and declared it was a plain indication of his belief in the virgin birth. Their deduction from this was that St. Mark's Gospel

must be of late date. It is now generally agreed that the Gospel was the earliest, but the striking suggestiveness of St. Mark's language remains. Taken in conjunction with his use of the phrase, "Son of God," *in the position in which it occurs,* this deliberate departure from the tradition followed by St. Matthew and St. Luke certainly turns the "silence" of St. Mark into a two-edged sword. It cuts one way as well as the other. It would seem to me a silence that gives consent.

Then take St. John. In this Gospel, the latest to appear, we enter into an entirely different atmosphere and realm of thought. I shall assume that it was written by the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, for I can see no reason whatever for believing otherwise. But even if it were the work of another John, possibly someone in the circle at Ephesus close to the old Apostle, its date—about the year 95—and its apostolic authority are sufficiently established for our purposes. Now the object in view in the writing of this Gospel is succinctly stated in chapter 20, verse 31. "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name." This object of the evangelist does not require the virgin birth

either as a foundation or as a buttress. Belief in Jesus Christ as the eternally begotten Son of the Most High rests upon the whole presentation of His life and words in the Gospel. But the close harmony of thought between this belief and the miraculous mode of our Saviour's entrance into the world of human life is so obvious that one would naturally look for some indication of this harmony in the language of a writer whose object it was to establish faith in the Divinity of our Lord and who was perfectly cognizant of the manner of His birth. I do not think that signs of consciousness of this underlying harmony are hard to find. "The Word was made flesh." Is this a normal reference to a normal birth into this world? If St. John had disbelieved the story, well known by that time, would he have used such language to describe the birth of Jesus? I find it hard to believe so. Certainly St. John's phrase fits in perfectly with the story narrated by St. Matthew and St. Luke.

But just before this statement which I have taken from the 14th verse of the 1st chapter, there is another statement so strangely apposite to our subject that it has claimed the attention of commentators for centuries. I may be pardoned, therefore, for dwelling at some length

upon the significance of the Apostle's words in the 13th verse. As given in our version, it reads: "which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." The reference is pretty clearly to a new spiritual birth for those who believe on the name of Christ. But note well the very unusual language. There are four separate expressions, each denoting plainly a human birth arising from a superhuman source. That birth was not (1) "of blood." The Greek, however, says "of bloods," suggesting the mingling life of parents in human generation. It was not (2) "of the will of the flesh," that is, the result of carnal instinct. It was not (3) "of the will of man"—rather, "of the will of a man," that is, the result of masculine parentage. But it was (4) "of God," that is, the source of the life was to be looked for not in any human agency, but in Divine power. The analogy between such language and the story of the virgin birth is unescapable. "How shall this be, seeing that I know not a man?" asked Mary of the angel. "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore that which is to be born shall be called holy, the Son of God." The parallel is exact. I believe that most commentators interpret the

passage simply as a reference to the spiritual re-birth of believers; but the description of that spiritual re-birth answers so literally to the actual physical birth of Christ as described by the other evangelists, that one is forced to suppose that St. John took the virgin birth as a symbol of the new life of Christians. Hence, St. John not only knew of the virgin birth, but directly alludes to it.

I confess, however, that this interpretation seems unsatisfactory to me. Why, if thinking of a new life, over and above and transcending the natural or animal life of man, should St. John go to the length of this four-fold denial of human and, apparently, masculine parentage? Why not, rather, use language such as we have from the lips of Christ Himself in the third chapter? "Except a man be born again . . ." It seems as if in the passage we are considering the emphasis was all on the virgin birth rather than on the spiritual birth. One does not lightly criticize the form of expression used in another language many centuries ago by such a person as "the disciple whom Jesus loved"; but to me the whole passage reads awkwardly, and I am glad to find escape from it in another version of the words, which is to be found in an ancient Latin manuscript, as well as in the writings of

some of the very early Christian authors. According to this other reading, verse 12 should come to a full stop with the words, "... them that believe on his name." Then verse 13 begins again, as a new sentence, without a relative pronoun connecting it with the previous words, and with a singular verb instead of a plural: "He was born, not of bloods, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a man, but of God. And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." In other words, it becomes a definite assertion of the virgin birth, logically connected with what follows. The Church father, Tertullian, not only used this reading, but openly charged certain Greek heretics with having corrupted the true text in order to weaken the evidence for the virgin birth. Other ancient writers use this same reading, showing that it was widely known. Several modern scholars of high standing have adopted it. Harnack apparently has it in mind when he refers to "the true text of St. John." Professor Zahn, of Erlangen University, argues at some length for this reading as the true one, basing his contention in part upon the grammatical construction, which, he shows, strongly favors it. Altogether, there is good authoritative opinion back of this reading, which I feel

confident is what the evangelist wrote. In the face of an overwhelming manuscript testimony the other way, no one would be justified in *asserting* that St. John taught the virgin birth explicitly; but we are justified in believing so. In either case, however, we are justified in saying that St. John knew the story from the other Gospels, and had it in his mind when he wrote the words we have been considering at such length. So we may practically remove his Gospel as well as St. Mark's from the list of the New Testament books which negatively disprove the truth of the virgin birth.

The contention that silence on the part of the writers of the other New Testament books militates against the truth of the birth tradition, has little weight, simply because none of them professes to give any historical account of Christ. In the case of St. Paul, his chief interest lies in the Godhead of our Saviour as manifested by the cross and the resurrection. He does not name either Joseph or Mary, makes no reference to Judas Iscariot, and only once speaks of Pilate, nor does he mention the names of most of the apostles. If his silence as to the virgin birth were to be taken as an indication of either ignorance or disbelief, then his silence as to most of the events of our Lord's life and

his general omission to quote His teaching might be used to show his general ignorance of the Gospel. He does, it is true, refer in a few passages to the fact, though not the event, of Christ's birth; but in each instance he uses a word to denote the fact which he nowhere uses of the birth of men in general. I shall have occasion to refer to this usage in more detail later on. For the present, however, it would be well to note that if St. Paul's choice of words has any significance—and I think it has—it means that he made a clear distinction in thought between the birth of "the express image of the Father" and the birth of the sons of men. His constant companion on his journeys was St. Luke, who gave the Church the most complete account of the virgin birth. Is it reasonable to suppose that, with that careful searcher for truth at his side, the great apostle to the gentiles could have failed to know the tradition? Or, is it reasonable to suppose that if he had learned of the virgin birth and did not believe it, he would not have denounced it as an old wives' fable; or that St. Luke would have used in his Gospel matter which his great hero, St. Paul, discredited? "God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law," wrote St. Paul. Let anyone say he is silent as to the

virgin birth. His language does not suggest ignorance.

With regard to the other New Testament writers there is no need to go into detail. The same general considerations apply to all. St. John has been covered. St. Peter is practically covered by considering St. Mark, who, according to good tradition, represents St. Peter's authority in his Gospel. St. James' epistle is chiefly practical. St. Jude's writing is too brief to expect anything outside of his immediate thought. The Epistle to the Hebrews, entitled as one of St. Paul's works, but more probably the production of someone else—possibly Apollos—again concerns itself with a line of thought which would hardly bring in the birth of Christ even incidentally. The language near the opening may be thought of as sympathetic with the doctrine of the virgin birth, but I would not press the point strongly. In quoting the 2nd psalm, "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee," the writer seems to have in mind the actual birth into this world of the Son of God. And again, in the 6th verse of the opening chapter, when he says, "When he bringeth the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him," he uses language which strongly suggests an acquain-

tance with St. Luke's account of the shepherds abiding in the field by night and the singing of *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. I do not say it is impossible that the writer had this portion of the birth narrative in mind when he used this quotation from the Greek version of the Old Testament, for the story of the shepherds would be an appealing one whenever heard—not easily forgotten. But the reference to angelic life is introduced into the epistle for quite a different purpose. The passage is simply an example of others which might be cited in which a devoutly receptive mind will find references or phrases which seem to harmonize with the tradition of the virgin birth of Christ.

The conclusion which we may safely adopt is this: that, from the very nature of things, the birth narratives were not matters of wide public knowledge for many years, and called for neither reference nor comment in any of the omitting books. Indeed, we may say that their insertion in the two Gospels which do use them was not essential to the later contents of those books. In the simple, non-doctrinal form in which the tradition is given, its interest may be called merely a human one. If, however, St. Matthew and St. Luke felt it was desirable to give the earthly genealogy of Jesus, in each

case according to the line of the legal and commonly accepted father, then the narratives which told of the entire absence of human fatherhood would most naturally be included. But so far as all the other New Testament writers are concerned, no further comment is necessary. Their "silence" has no bearing upon the truth of the tradition.

V

HOW DID THE STRANGE STORY ARISE? WHAT THE CRITICS SAY

To those who quite naturally and simply believe the stories told by St. Matthew and St. Luke, the virgin birth of our Lord is not a problem. The truth is sufficient. But it is otherwise to those who will not accept the miracle as a fact or even as a possibility. Here we have two independent accounts of the same great wonder—perfectly well attested parts of the Gospel—as documents, quite on a par with all else in the books in which they are found. Where did they come from? How old are they? What suggested the amazing thing which they relate? What connection have they with other ideas in early Christian thought, or with folklore in general? Such questions have prompted a tremendous deal of study and research for about a century past—research, we may say, of a most valuable kind, for it takes us over a wide field of great interest and results in a far better

understanding of early Christian life and thought. It can hardly be said that there is always a very close agreement among the radical critics in the answers which they give to such questions as I have suggested; in fact, it is just the other way. Starting with the premise that the miracle is impossible, the radical critics explain the existence of the story in a variety of ways—calling it a myth, calling it a pious legend, or calling it a rather barefaced fraud—but always bravely seeking its source in some understandable origin. An inveterate prejudice against considering the possibility of the tradition being true controls such critics and sends them far afield in their search for a reasonable explanation of the unreasonable story; and then, they get into trouble with each other, and tear each other's theories to pieces. But, explain the source of the story they must.

I asked an unbelieving layman once how he accounted for the tradition. He answered, in effect, that myths analogous to the Christ-legend were very common in ancient times, and —well, that fact was enough to explain it. His answer was, roughly speaking, typical of a large class of answers made by skeptical critics. It is asserted that it seems to have been instinctive among the ancients to associate the birth of any

great outstanding figure in mythology, legend, or history, with supernatural happenings; and especially to imagine some direct paternal relationship between a god and the child—whether the child became a demi-god, hero, or emperor. And so, beginning far back in the second century, the scouters of the truth of the virgin birth of Christ have found much satisfaction in bringing forward cases of so-called virgin birth in many an ancient myth and in various old religions. They have gone to Greek mythology and found the Danae-Perseus fable; to Roman superstitions regarding the birth of no less a person than Caesar Augustus; to old scandals connected with the paternity of Alexander the Great; to Buddhism; to Babylonian, Persian and Egyptian mythologies. In short, they have searched through the whole ancient world to find parallels to the birth tradition of Christ; and I think it is only fair to the believers' side to say that they have found no parallel at all. For the most part, such myths are obscene and carnal, so much so as to be offensive to the better-minded among the ancients themselves. It is not enough to cite the mere fact of a miracle in connection with a birth story to suggest a resemblance or source of the Christian tradition. There must be some corres-

pondence in moral and spiritual tone, for the moral and spiritual elements in the Gospel are of its very essence. This is particularly and conspicuously the case in the beautiful little narratives of the birth of our Lord. Furthermore, even disregarding the undisguisedly immoral tone of heathen myths about the lusts of the gods, one wonders, in reading them, how even the barest outline of the circumstances could possibly have suggested to Jewish-Christian minds such a thought as we find enshrined in the evangelic narratives. I suppose that the ancient myth which is most conspicuously lofty in its moral feeling is that of Buddha; and many little resemblances have been found in it to the Christian story. But, I would ask, could the fantastic legend of a white elephant entering the side of the mother—who was *not* a virgin—have produced anything but repulsion in devout Hebrew hearts? It is of such stuff as this that we are supposed to find the inspiration for the pure story in the Gospel.

We must not lose sight of the special characteristics of Hebrew religion. The Jewish conception of God emphasized His oneness, His transcendence, His spiritual nature, His righteousness. There would seem to be no point whatever where the Jewish faith and gentile

religions could meet, so that a gentile myth which carried with it a conception of God abhorrent to Jewish instinct could find no lodgement in the old-fashioned, devout, prayerful groups which we see in the narratives of St. Matthew and St. Luke. As I pointed out in considering the qualities of those narratives, they read almost like bits out of the Old Testament. They are intensely Jewish, both in spirit and in language. Even supposing that some possible channel might be found through which a heathen myth of a great man's birth could reach that little circle from which our tradition manifestly sprang—quiet, simple, godly people, students of the Law and the Prophets, intensely racial in their prejudices and hopes, patiently waiting for the fulfilment of God's promises—even supposing that a partially and superficially similar story to the Christ tradition could have reached their knowledge from a gentile source, we may be sure that its very origin and associations would have prevented its having the slightest effect on their minds. Still less could it have been adopted and adapted to form the basis of a Jewish-Christian legend. The God of Israel, holy beyond the power of language to declare, ineffable, unapproachable, whose very Name must not be spoken, was not to be con-

fused with the half-human false deities of the gentiles. To think of Him at all in connection with such birth myths as were rife among the heathen would have been an impossibility. Professor Harnack, though he does not, of course, admit the virgin birth, has done much to demolish the fabric of guesswork concerning gentile influence in accounting for the Christian tradition. He says: "As for parallels with ancient stories of gods and heroes, it would be treating them too seriously to describe them as scanty and feeble."

What then? If it was not a gentile myth which prompted the tradition, how about a Jewish source? The birth stories are most strikingly Jewish in themselves; is there nothing in old Hebrew thought which can account for the strange tale of a virgin birth? There is, answers a large group of modern critics, and it is right before your eyes in St. Matthew—the well known words: "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." Some studious Jewish-Christian in the church at Jerusalem, reflecting on the strangely exact way in

which Hebrew prophecy was fulfilled in the life and experience of Jesus of Nazareth, seized upon this prediction in the prophet Isaiah, perhaps reflected on the aptness of the name Emmanuel when applied to the Lord, and discussed the matter with his colleagues. That would be enough. It is not necessary to do more than *start* an idea like this; the rest follows. The psychology of legendary growth is exemplified frequently in matters which are published in the daily papers. Give a lie a good start, and nothing will ever catch up with it. This would be the case especially in such a circle of enthusiasts as existed in the church at Jerusalem—men utterly devoted to the holy memory of their Lord, living in a sort of exaltation of mind and heart, ready to use anything which they could find in their own sacred writings which would exalt the glory or set forward the messianic claims of Jesus of Nazareth. It is not necessary to accuse them of the deliberate invention of a fiction under such circumstances. All that is required is the germ of the idea of a virgin birth for Christ —and that germ the prophet supplied.

I believe that the above fairly represents in simple terms the theory of some of the most scholarly critics of the present time; in fact, I suppose that it is the most authoritative expla-

nation of the birth tradition that has been set forth by those who cannot accept the narratives of the evangelists as giving the literal truth. It is, of course, a plausible theory and we must examine it with sufficient care. To go into all the considerations which it involves would be unnecessary; but I will analyze it and try to show its fallacies—for it is plainly too full of difficulties to stand.

1. This theory assumes that the words of Isaiah quoted in St. Matthew alone and by themselves suggested the tradition of the virgin birth; and therefore, the theory must assume also that in order to suggest that idea the words would be looked upon by Jewish Christians as prophetic of the coming of the Christ. But the words were not so interpreted, and no one of Jewish descent, at any period, would have connected the child of this passage with the expected Messiah. Messianic prophecy was reduced to an exact science by the rabbis, and all the Old Testament passages which referred to the Messiah were carefully studied and made the subject of synagogue instruction. This passage, Isaiah vii, 14, was never thought of as predicting the birth of the Christ. We have it on the best authority that there is not a single trace of such an idea. In fact, it was explicitly

denied by a learned Jew in the second century, who challenged his Christian adversary to produce a single instance of Jewish teaching to support the connection of this passage with the coming of the Messiah.

2. The theory is seriously weakened by the fact that the Jews did not expect the Messiah to be virgin born—in fact, did not include a virgin birth at all in their thoughts, any more than modern critics do. There is nothing in the Old Testament or the writings of the rabbis to suggest the idea. It was an unheard of thought, foreign to all Hebrew notions. Even after the tradition had become part of the belief of the Church, the virgin birth of Christ was denied by the Ebionites, a sect of extreme Jewish Christians.

3. The theory requires that the word translated "virgin" should mean exactly what we mean in English. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word is *parthenos,* which does mean just what we mean by virgin in English. In the Hebrew original, however, the word is *alma,* which does not denote a virgin, but merely a young woman. The probability is that the translators of the Greek version of the Old Testament simply meant to say that a young woman who was then a virgin would

marry and bear a son and would call his name Emmanuel. Certainly the passage did not include the thought of a real virgin birth so far as Jewish understanding went. It does not necessarily include that thought in English. But, above all, it could not possibly have suggested the idea of the virgin birth tradition to the Jewish-Christian circle in the old city of Jerusalem, or in Alexandria or anywhere else. It is not a Jewish idea at all.

4. The theory ignores the fact that the passage is quoted only in St. Matthew and is not referred to by St. Luke. If, as the theory goes, the whole idea that our Lord was born of a virgin mother started from this one passage in Isaiah, then any narrative which set forth the virgin birth would cling to the words of the prophet as a plant clings to its roots. St. Luke's narrative, though it is, if anything, more intensely Hebraic than St. Matthew's, and constantly harks back to the Old Testament in its phraseology and by direct quotation, exists quite independently of its supposed prophetic source. It does not mention it. Where did *it* come from?

So much for this widely held theory of the origin of the Christian tradition of the birth of Christ.

In view of all that I have urged against the idea of a virgin birth being contained or implied in the passage quoted, why, it may be asked, does St. Matthew use the words at all? I should answer that *after the event of the birth* the reference was a perfectly natural and legitimate one. We must remember that the evangelist is constantly finding sayings in the scripture which are "fulfilled" in the life of Jesus. A typical case of this habit of his is found in the very next chapter in a quotation from Hosea, "Out of Egypt did I call my son." The clear reference, unmistakable to every reader nowadays, is to the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Is the evangelist to be faulted for finding a further fulfillment of the words in the life of the Child Jesus? Our Lord Himself is constantly reported as doing much the same thing. The Old Testament was the very charter of His life. He pointed to Himself as the complete fulfillment of all of Israel's hopes. "Search the scriptures," He said, "for in them ye believe ye have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me." And again, "If ye believe Moses ye would believe me; for he wrote of me." And so, in the passage from Isaiah, although it is perfectly evident that the words could not have suggested to any Jewish

Christian such a thing as a virgin birth, yet the aptness of the whole quotation is not hard to see. Ahaz, like Joseph, was deeply troubled in spirit. The prophet gives him a "sign"—the birth of a child—a sign which assures the king of the unending perpetuation of the throne of David, then in peril. So, the angel, speaking to "Joseph, thou son of David," assures him of an even greater deliverance through the child, "for he shall save his people from their sins." Is not the writer of St. Matthew warranted in recalling the words of Isaiah? Are we justified in cheapening the words of the New Testament just because we find it hard to believe in miracles? Has not the passage an infinitely richer meaning and fittingness than if it be thought of simply as a poor and inadequate suggestion of an otherwise unexplainable legend? Such criticism is wearying. How infinitely simpler it is just to accept the truth in faith.

There are other theories which seek to explain the tradition either by obscure Old Testament suggestions or by Jewish folklore. I will not tire the reader by giving any of them, for they are intricate, cumbersome, and utterly unconvincing. I do not think any of them has much critical support.

Topsy says: "I spects I growed," to explain

her being. Is this, then, the explanation of the birth tradition, that it just "growed"? How, or why a legend starts, it would often be hard to say. The critics give themselves unnecessary trouble in their world-wide search for the seed of Christian belief. The belief is there, dating from very early days. Why not simply say it grew? Well, apart from the fact that the soil in which the tradition started would not spontaneously produce such a rare flower as we find in the story of the evangelists, we only have to glance at other ancient Christian writings than the New Testament to find out what legends were really like. For we have early Christian legends in plenty, and all we have to do is to heed Hamlet's urging to "Look here upon this picture, and on this." I will give a sample or two.

From the Gospel of the Infancy: "When the Lord Jesus was seven years of age, he was with other boys his companions about the same age. Who, when they were at play, made clay into several shapes, namely, asses, oxen, birds, and other figures, each boasting of his work and endeavouring to exceed the rest. Then the Lord Jesus said to the boys, I will command these figures which I have made to walk. And immediately they moved, and when he com-

manded them to return, they returned. He had also made figures of birds and sparrows, which, when he commanded to fly, did fly, and when he commanded to stand still, did stand still; and if he gave them meat and drink, they did eat and drink."

And again. "And Joseph, wheresoever he went in the city, took the Lord Jesus with him where he was sent for to work to make gates, or milkpails, or sieves, or boxes; the Lord Jesus was with him wheresoever he went. And as often as Joseph had anything in his work to make longer or shorter or wider or narrower, the Lord Jesus would stretch his hand toward it, and presently it became as Joseph would have it."

And again. "It was after sunset, when the old woman and Joseph with her reached the cave, and they both entered. And, behold, the whole cave was filled with lights, greater than the light of lamps and candles, yea, greater than the light of the sun. The babe was then wrapped in swaddling clothes, and sucking at the breasts of his mother, Mary. When they both saw this light, they were amazed. And the old woman asked blessed Mary and said, Art thou the mother of this child? And Mary answered and said, I am. Whereupon the old

woman said, Thou art very different from all other women. And the blessed Mary answered and said, As there is not any child like to my child, so neither is there any mother like to his mother."

It would be possible to go on with this painful sort of thing for a long time, quoting from the various books of what is called the Apocryphal New Testament. The point of the comparison with the true Gospel lies in the inevitable excesses to which actual legend always tends.

Sir William Ramsay says, in another connection: "Oriental tradition (he is really referring to legend) is so free in its creation, so unfettered by any thought of suitability in the accessories, that it is marked off from history by a deep, broad gap." The Jews of the time of our Saviour were not without their folklore, but we are safe in saying that nothing from it has ever been brought forward which either in matter or style remotely suggests either the central idea, or the spiritual sincerity, reserve, and simplicity of the birth narratives of the Gospels. These are qualities which cannot be ignored. Even the art of a literary genius when portraying fiction rarely reaches the level which is so unconsciously set by those who spake the truth of old.

VI

A SUBORDINATE TRUTH

FROM THE RATHER bare outline of the case in behalf of the virgin birth which I have sketched up to this point, I think we may say we have a reasonably good historical basis for believing the tradition. We have two entirely independent, authentic documents, manifestly written without any deceptive motive—that is, in good faith—uninfluenced by Jewish or gentile suggestion, simple and reserved in style, each narrating identically the same thing, but in an utterly different setting from the other, and without a trace of collusion. Such documents constitute what would ordinarily be regarded as sound evidence of truth. Many events in the past which rest upon inferior evidence have been universally accepted as fact.

When, however, we take into consideration the element of the supernatural, we must frankly admit that a good historical basis is not enough to insure general assent. In the view of

the modern world in general the presumption is all against the truth of anything that is not strictly in accordance with natural law. We must, therefore, find out what the virgin birth *means* in the economy of divine wisdom; must be ready to give to him that asketh a *reason* of the hope that is in us. A stupendous miracle which is unrelated to great actualities is a meaningless thing, offensive to sober faith as well as to reason. So we must learn the meaning of the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, and, above all, ask ourselves how the fact is related to the greatest truth of all—His Divinity.

There are wrong ways and there is a right way of approaching this matter. I believe it is a serious mistake to ignore the necessity for a reasonable interpretation of such a great mystery as the birth of a human child of a virgin mother, but to say that it must be accepted by all good Christians solely upon the authority of the Bible. I trust that I have said enough to make it plain that I, for one, do accept the evangelists' narratives as literally true. I am old-fashioned enough to accept them in their entirety and not with reservations—not taking refuge, for example, in a theory of "poetical license" when it comes to the shepherds' vision of the angels. But, on the other hand, it is not

true to say that the sober sense of Christendom endorses the idea of the complete and literal infallibility of the Bible. Whatever individual teachers may have said on this matter at various times, or whatever stand some few church bodies may have taken, it certainly cannot be said that any claim for the literal accuracy of the whole Bible, or for the absolute authenticity of all its parts, has today, or ever has had, the united support of Christian thought and teaching as a whole. Martin Luther, for example, practically repudiated the whole epistle of St. James on account of its teaching. Very few, if any, scholars would admit that the last twelve verses of St. Mark are genuine. The second epistle of St. Peter is seriously questioned by high authority. The trend of judgment as to the authenticity of the various books is far more conservative than it was a generation ago, and we need have no fear that the authority of scripture will be weakened in the years to come. I believe it will be just the other way. At the same time, a simple stand upon the complete accuracy of either the Old or New Testament is too unintelligent to endure the modern attacks of rationalism upon our faith. So we must have Biblical testimony, *plus* Biblical study, *plus* careful and reasonable interpretation, in order

to establish the truth of the Christian tradition regarding the birth of our Lord.

Again, I believe it is wrong to suppose that our belief in the Divinity of Christ takes its rise from the fact of His virgin birth. St. Paul was teaching the Divinity of Christ before the fact of the virgin birth was known excepting to a few. He was teaching that great doctrine in the most definite way, and Christians were accepting it as fundamental truth, several years before the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke appeared. The opening words of St. John's first epistle reveal the basis upon which rested the whole structure of faith. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life . . . that . . . declare we unto you." The overwhelming conviction in the hearts and minds of the first eyewitnesses of what Jesus of Nazareth was—a conviction which grew irresistibly out of their daily life with Him, when they saw with their own eyes His transcending power over both human souls and physical nature, when they heard truth told as it had never been told before, when they touched the awful cross-wounds and saw their Master living again after His death—this overwhelming conviction

of reality bore all else before it from the day of Pentecost. It has reached into the consciousness of untold millions ever since, and, through the marvelous pages of the Gospel, is today our surest warrant for the faith by which we live. I believe and love the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. But I must bear witness to the fact that as a force in turning men to Christ in the earliest days, it did not exist, and, I say it reverently, it could not have been intended to become a factor in persuading the world at any time of the truth of Christ's Godhead.

No—we must place the virgin birth, as a valid tradition or as a true doctrine, in its proper and rightful setting—in its necessary relationship to the central thought of our religion. We must not make of it a fetish—we must not think of it simply as one of the inexplicable wonders told in an infallibly true Bible—we must not base upon it either our faith in Christ or our love for Christ—we must not suppose that such a birth is more *seemly* than the birth of Christ's brother men. To think in these ways is to put a wrong emphasis upon a belief which is subject to much misunderstanding and which is under the fire of rationalistic disdain at this very time, and so, to do injury to an element of Christian faith which is not only dear to millions of be-

lievers but which also lies very close to the most important truth of all—the divine and eternal personality of Him who was born of Mary. And so we must strive to understand what the virgin birth really means, why it was a part of God's purpose of redemption, why it was revealed in the Gospel, and why it must remain as an essential of the expression of Christian teaching everywhere and at all times. To probe thus deeply into a mystery of divine life may seem to some rash and presumptuous; and yet the questions I have suggested have been at least partially answered many times with such reverence, such spiritual insight, and such fidelity to the facts as we have learned them, that we may understand better why the church has so jealously guarded the doctrine of the virgin birth as a sure and vital part of its whole message.

It is so necessary that we should start right in our interpretation of the subject, that before we go on in another chapter to consider the special ways in which the virgin birth is related to our fundamental belief, I will ask the reader to follow me in a little venture of constructive imagination in order to bring before our minds more clearly certain human aspects of the nar-

ratives which bear upon the true position and interpretation of our doctrine.

Let us go back again to St. Matthew's narrative. Each time I read this I am more strongly impressed by two thoughts: first, that no one excepting St. Joseph could have revealed what we are told in this narrative; and, second, that the responsibility which was laid upon his faith and courage was truly awful. We can readily understand the wretched sinking of his heart when he learned of the condition of his betrothed wife; we can commend the mercy which prompted that "just man" in a cruel age to spare a young woman so far as he could. But can we so easily rise to the full height of his faith in God which led him to trust absolutely the vision of truth which was sent him, and to take Mary to wife, and to share her shame, to shield her and tenderly protect her, and to look stedfastly forward with undismayed confidence in her goodness to the birth that was to come? What must he do? Keep silence, or try to make others understand? Clearly, silence was the part of wisdom and of goodness, too, though the burden he had to carry in his heart was heavier than it is given to many to bear. But let us ask ourselves this: when the little son

was born, and as St. Joseph watched Him day by day growing in favour with God and man, can we suppose that he even dimly or remotely guessed any of the truth as we believe it today? I cannot suppose so for a moment. Such a fathoming of God's unsearchable plan of redemption for all mankind could not, we may feel sure, have come to that humble Jewish spirit; and we may reverently believe that St. Joseph closed his eyes in death without one shadow of a thought that that dear Son, who must so lovingly have served His earthly father, was none other than One with the Father of us all.

But before his days were ended St. Joseph would have felt that what he knew too well to doubt, the purity and integrity of Mary, must, for her sake and for her son's sake, be made known to at least one or two who could be trusted. Whisperings and scandal there must always have been, and that this scandal persisted long we may infer from St. John's Gospel. And so the little record was begun. We know nothing as to who wrote the words which we have, though I confess to a feeling that it was St. Joseph himself, who, as head of the household would look upon it as a sacred duty to put his secret in written form. But, whether he wrote

the words, or trusted to some safe, tried friend, we have the facts from him; the message of the angel in a vision, the goodness of Mary, the birth and naming of the baby, the coming of the far-dwelling magi, the dread of Herod's malignity, the wearying exile, the coming home at last. Nothing else came from that faithful guardian—no faint foreshadowing of the truth which should one day set on fire human hearts and change the very aspect of all human life. If that little record contained one word as coming from those lips which had pressed on the soft child cheeks of Him whom St. Joseph took to his heart as his own son, to suggest that he dreamed who that son really was, it would brand itself as a spurious thing, unworthy of our belief.

Then take St. Luke's account. From the opening address to Theophilus, written in the Greek of a man of education and culture, we pass directly into a narrative which has been well described as Greek only in the words which are used—for it is all Hebrew in thought and tone. It is plainly a woman's story, a mother's story; and that mother was of the race of Israel to the marrow of her bones. We need not suppose that she wrote the words herself; some close confidante there must have been whom she could

trust with her most intimate thoughts. How, or when, or through whose mediation the exquisitely reserved little record, with its unmistakable feminine touches, came into the hands of the beloved physician, we shall never know. Some have surmised that it was Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, who became the source of St. Luke's knowledge of the earliest years. Be that as it may, the evangelist tells us simply that he had had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, and that he wrote in order that Theophilus might know the *certainty* of those things which were believed. Let that be enough. He has shown well that he is trustworthy; and I think it is clear that he used no words of his own in handing down the tradition excepting only what were needed to connect the parts into one well constructed whole.

We will not follow the story in detail, but will notice again what we found in the case of St. Joseph, that even she who had pondered all things and kept them in her heart, betrays no consciousness of who and what her God-sent child must be. Bishop Brooks, in a Christmas sermon, brings out in a fine passage the essentially human bond between St. Mary and the little Jesus. And it was simply that—a human

bond. It was a precious gift from God that she had had, marvelous in its sending. But, though she may well have looked wonderingly forward to greater things in her son's life than had ever come to man before, yet we may be sure He was not divine to that heart from which He was nourished. How much more the virgin mother may have come to think in later years when the beloved John had taken her to his own home, when her son had risen from the awful death which she had seen, and at last had passed to His Father's side, no one may say. But I would rather suppose that the benediction of God's peace in death came to that handmaid of the Lord while she was yet unwitting of the truth, than to try to imagine that she ever knew or ever could have believed that God had chosen her to bear the human form of His eternal Son.

And so, at last, near to the awful days when the holy city was laid in ruins by the legions of Titus, at a time when the young religion of our Saviour was pressing its way into human hearts far and wide throughout the great empire, those two stories of the birth of the Lord began to come to the ears of the churches. As the scrolls of papyrus came to the different centers, and the long, scrupulously careful labor of

copying was begun, and the words were read to the disciples, and the elders preached the tidings, can we suppose that this newly published truth about the birth of Jesus Christ made Christians feel more assured that He, their Lord and Saviour, was indeed their God, the eternal Son of the Most High? I cannot believe so. The undaunted Paul and many others had for years been declaring the great truth to all; and their message had met no obstacle in the hearts of those who had been prepared and instructed by the preaching of the Apostles, but rather became almost at once the very heart of all Christian thinking. Without that clear, inspired message of the Godhead of the Saviour and the constant assurance of the resurrection, we could hardly comprehend the amazing growth of the religion of the Cross. Christianity found its first great motive power in the conviction of the divinity of Him who had risen from the dead. But then, when this newly told truth about their Lord's birth came quietly out of its old Palestine home, and slipped, as it were, gently into its place in the faith of the churches, those men and women of the early days could understand, and I believe did understand, that the wonderful birth of the Saviour was just one thing with all else which they had

learned about Him—that God *gave* His Son to men—that God *sent* Him into the world—and the story of Bethlehem became the last link in a great chain of truth which bound them all together in the Body of Christ.

There is a strange potency in the doctrine of the virgin birth, as the history of our religion shows, for there are few things in the Gospel which stir the imagination so much as it does with its human appeal. And it is a potency which can accomplish as much in these days of advanced learning as it did in the Dark Ages. But we must be careful to think of it as it really is—not one of the original foundations of our belief in Christ, but, when faithfully accepted, as a sure and strong safeguard in our thoughts about our Saviour's person. And Christian theology sets forth the doctrine of the virgin birth, not as an isolated wonder to stun men's minds, but as a part of the eternal purpose of God of sending His only-begotten Son into this world to live our life in human form and nature.

When we think of the virgin birth in this way, there is much else with which it seems to be related; the transfiguration, the resurrection, the ascension, all being manifestations of that human body which was born not of the will of the flesh nor of the will of a man, but of God.

Indeed, I do not feel that it is going too far to suppose that the body and blood of Christ which we receive in a sacramental way, go back for their meaning to the conception by the Holy Ghost. It seems simpler to think of the human spirit being touched and nourished by that which was existent by the will of God. However these things may be, and I merely suggest them, I should like to bear witness to the fact that for me there is no aspect of our Saviour's life on earth which better assures me than does His virgin birth of the closeness of God to men —of His immanence in creation. Nor can I find anything which speaks more clearly than it does concerning the unwithholding trust which God will place in men and women who will, like St. Joseph, do as they are bidden of the Lord, or, like St. Mary, say: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."

VII

WHAT DOES THE VIRGIN BIRTH MEAN?

We must come back in this chapter to the great pivotal thought of the Christian religion, the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and ask in what definite ways His virgin birth is connected with this thought?

When we speak of the divinity of Christ, we do not mean simply that our Lord displayed divine or godlike qualities of mind and heart, that He resembled God in His sublime righteousness of character, that He lived so close to God that His life might be said to represent the divine ideal in human form, that He was one with God, in His purposes and aims. Ideas like these about Christ are popularly current, but if we stop with them and say no more we have got nowhere at all. Such conceptions of the Jesus of the Gospels do not even begin to represent the sublime figure who comes to us out of the Gospel pages. No—when we speak

of the divinity of Christ we mean that in His very person, in His inmost being, our Lord was and is God Himself—God the eternal Son, begotten of His Father before all worlds. If we stop with the thought of Christ as essentially human only, however gifted with the Spirit of God, however raised above our level by the purity of His life and by His perfect understanding of the will of God, then we have failed completely to comprehend and express that faith in Him which His whole life sought to evoke from those who knew Him on earth. If the early church had stopped with this, our religion could hardly have survived two generations. But the early church did not stop with this. With amazing swiftness of perception it laid hold on the fact that Jesus was not simply human in His person, but was God in the flesh. This great truth may be looked upon as the A B. C. of Christianity in the New Testament period. St. Paul and St. John stand out as enunciating the thought most emphatically—St. Paul, by his indefatigable zeal in carrying the message far and wide, and St. John, by his sublime expression of the truth. But these inspired leaders were, after all, only developing the conviction which underlay all the testimony of the other eyewitnesses and ministers of the

Word; and Christians everywhere in apostolic days received and accepted the message of Christ's divinity with gladness and singleness of heart.

Out of this truth of the divinity of Christ developed what has long been known as the Doctrine of the Incarnation. Briefly put, this doctrine comprises three essential ideas: first, that in Jesus Christ there was and is one only person, God the eternal Son; second, that the eternal nature of Christ is the divine nature of God; third, that in coming into our life, this eternal person of divine nature took unto Himself a second nature, man's nature—body, mind, soul, will, affections, instincts—everything which pertains to the entire man. In this same human nature He rose again from death, and ascended into heaven, carrying into the presence of the eternal Father that perfect thing, man's nature, pure and undefiled by sin.

To not a few people in these days the careful language of theology comes with a kind of shock. It seems to them presumptuous to speak with such precision about matters which far transcend our comprehension—like a rushing in where angels fear to tread. And I will agree that it is regrettable to have to try to express the inexpressible—to put the mystery of God's

love into the cold and formal terms of ecclesiastical decisions. But experience teaches that it is necessary that this should be done. It is not as if the church fathers of the early centuries had decided to sit together and draw up a complete system of theological teaching. That was not the way of it. No—every decision of the old undivided church concerning the person of our Lord was forced upon the church by false teaching—the false teaching often of brilliant and influential men in the ministry, who preferred their own theories to the simple message of the New Testament. Sometimes those misleading teachers declared our Lord to be a created being, higher than archangels, but less than God. Sometimes they went to the other extreme and identified Him with God the Father. Sometimes they denied that He was really man. Sometimes they taught that He was two persons, one human, the other divine. Sometimes they seemed to think that He was just a human person of excelling righteousness upon whom God bestowed His Spirit in plenitude. And so, in answer to all of these misconstructions of the Gospel, little by little the great fundamental doctrine called the Incarnation was developed, as a guide to right thinking and a safeguard to right teaching about our Saviour. Need we add

that the wisdom and farsightedness of the ancient church have been amply proved by the unspeakable blessings which this great doctrine has brought to Christian thought ever since, carrying with it, as it does, all the rich meaning contained in the promise of atonement and grace and hope for the life to come?

Now, to go just a little bit farther in theology, there are three special truths which belong to the Incarnation doctrine. These are, first, our Lord was sinless in His life; second, our Lord is the source of a new life for men; and, third, our Lord was and is eternal and divine in person. This last we have already stated as the principle element of apostolic teaching. Let us consider what connection in thought there may be between each of these truths and the virgin birth of Jesus Christ.

1. Our Lord was sinless in His life. How does this truth bear upon the virgin birth?

We speak of our Lord as sinless with good reason, for so He comes to us in the Gospel portraiture, so He is declared to be by His witnesses, and so He declares Himself to be. He is unique in human life in this respect, for no other great and holy one has claimed perfection of moral life. His record alone will bear the test of closest scrutiny and come through with-

out accusation of error or sin. He alone could fearlessly stand before His adversaries and challenge them: "Which of you convicteth me of sin?"

But, when we say that our Lord was sinless we fall far short of the truth. He was that, but He was more. Perfect freedom from moral taint is never found in human life, save in the very young; and yet innocence is not inconceivable. I believe it has been very closely approached in thousands of lives. But with our Lord it was different. His moral life must not be thought of as simply a freedom from error and wrongdoing, but it must be thought of in the most positive terms. In the Gospel it is presented to us as a flaming exhibition of militant righteousness uninterrruptedly active. It is an invincible power in itself—a creative power for good. Within Him were no self-contradictions, there was no need of regret, no awful yearning for an unattainable goal; but all was onward, unhindered progress. When St. Luke speaks of His growth in the favor of God (the words may have been a mother's tribute), we are not to think of that growth as a development from moral imperfection toward something better and higher, but rather as the natural stages of progress in a human life which was always per-

fect. "I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." The opposition of Jesus to the darkness of evil is like the glorious flood of sunlight over the new-born earth in the allegory of creation—something which has never been seen in the fulness of its strength and beauty in man or woman. Christ is sinless, but He is more. He is the power of righteousness in all who will use Him. "If any man thirst, let Him come to me and drink." It is a quality which human parentage cannot possibly convey. Our stock is too weakened by countless generations of evil to transmit this invincible moral power.

We may, perhaps, understand our Lord's righteousness more clearly if we consider Him as subject to our own many temptations of every kind. We are warranted in thinking of temptation coming to Him incessantly—through sense, through emotion, through mind and heart. We must be ready to understand that there was in His complete human nature just that of which we ourselves are acutely conscious, that is, every capacity for responding to the allure of evil pleasure and to the behest of selfish purpose, and also a consciousness of the awful need of hard resistance. Otherwise had

His temptations not been actual. I remember hearing a devout and learned theologian say that he supposed no man ever was tempted to the degree that our Saviour was tempted. I believe that this is true. "But yet without sin." And we may well ask, Why? How could a human life be lived without sin? And to find our answer, we must consider who He was and what was the origin of His human life which so manifestly rose superior to the awful power of temptation. Our Lord's true human nature, so susceptible to everything which brings pleasure to men, so responsive to emotion, so completely equipped with human instincts, so beset by human needs, so intimate in its contacts with men, women, and children, was a fresh, new thing in an evil world. Born by the power of the creative Spirit of a virgin mother, that human nature was untrammelled by the awful weight of inherited selfishness. In this our Lord was all by Himself on earth. We have no word to describe His moral grandeur, because that is something which man does not and cannot know or comprehend. His temptations searched out every portion of His human form and nature. He went through the full moral struggle of humanity. He suffered all the agony, and was

blessed with all the peace which are involved in a successful combat with evil. Like us, He wanted human fellowship in His strife: "Could ye not watch with me one hour?" Like us, He knew the need of self-discipline: "He fasted forty days and forty nights." Like us, He came to God for strength and help: "O my father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done." But, unlike us who are born of men, in His inmost being Jesus our Lord was always free to choose the highest good, the perfect way of God.

Such militant holiness as our Saviour's life displayed does not inhere in those who are born of men; of this we are acutely conscious. Our long inheritance is of another kind; the race of man does not transmit the power of righteousness. Of such an one who actually went through the moral ordeal of human life unscathed we shall find the truest explanation when we learn that His life came not from human weakness but from divine power. That such a conclusion is not irrational is suggested by this brief sentence from Bishop Gore's *Belief in God,* giving the view of one of the foremost agnostic scientists of modern times: "I once drew from Huxley the admission that if he believed—what he

did not—that Jesus was strictly sinless, he would suppose that that involved as well a physical as a moral miracle."

2. Then consider the fact that our Lord was and is today the source of a new life, or a new kind of life, for all the world. How does this truth bear upon the virgin birth?

I suppose that there are few thoughts in Christianity which are so universally cherished as is this thought of Christ as the progenitor, so to speak, of a new spiritual race. "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." Even among those who go far in their repudiation of the orthodox conceptions of our Lord's person, the thought of "the Christ within," illuminating, vivifying, strengthening, has become almost the starting point of Christianity. Not only was His life on earth the ideal life, but He Himself *is* the life of men.

St. Paul seized upon this thought as enunciated by our Lord and made it familiar to all to whom he wrote. He developed the idea in a contrast which he drew between Adam, "the first man," the type of the natural life of men, and Christ, "the second man," or, as St. Paul also calls him, "the last Adam." Thus in Adam all die; but in Christ shall all be made

alive. The life which Adam lived was of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven. And the new life which takes its rise from Him is deathless: "Death is swallowed up in victory." In this thought we reach the very ultimate conception of Christ's mission to the world. The entire race needed, and needs, a new start, a new spiritual beginning, a new source of vitality. There is something almost cosmic in the idea thus presented. Our Lord's own most cherished name, the Son of Man, suggests His complete identification with human life—but not as one of many, rather, as the representative and head of the race. He is the way, the truth, and the life—Himself. He proclaims the laws of the new life with infallible authority. "I say unto you," is His sufficient reason; and it is enough, for no other authority is on a par with his simplest declaration. And the whole civilized world today recognizes His coming as the beginning of a new era, and dates its years from Him, each one as a "year of the Lord."

To say that such a founder of a new race, whose coming is universally thought of as instituting a new age and a new life for the human spirit, of which new life He himself is the source, to say that this founder should owe His life to that nature which He came to uplift,

that that source should proceed from the lower level, seems almost like a contradiction in terms.

But as St. Paul set forth the thought of Christ as the New Adam in his own masterly way, let us see if, in spite of his silence as to the virgin birth, he does not seem to make some difference between the birth of men in general and the birth of the founder of the new race.

Sometimes it happens that the choice of a particular word becomes a matter of deep significance; and I would have the reader note an illustration of this fact in the language of St. Paul's epistles. I do not think that the apostle's choice of words in what I have in mind can be dismissed as of no importance. There are only a few passages in his writings in which he refers to the birth of Christ or to the birth of men in general, but in every case he uses one word to denote Christ's birth and a different word to denote normal birth. To put it exactly, he uses the verb *gignomai* in connection with Christ, and *gennao* in connection with men. His use in this respect is invariable; he never confuses the two methods of speech. The first word, *gignomai,* which he applies to the birth of Christ, is frequently used in classic Greek to denote birth—but never in New Testament Greek, which was of a much later date. In other words, it is unique

phraseology in the Bible. Only once in the rest of the New Testament is it found in the sense of "born," and that is when St. John says, "The Word was made flesh." And this, of course, is exactly the way in which St. Paul uses it. It would seem as if St. Paul in employing this unusual mode of speech, was, whether consciously or unconsciously, making a distinction between the coming into the world of the Son of God and the birth of the sons of men—a distinction which would readily be explained by his knowledge of the virgin birth. I will list the passages referred to, translating *gignomai* into the English verb to "become," for that is very close to its true meaning.

Romans i. 3, "Jesus Christ our Lord, who *became* of the seed of David according to the flesh."

Galatians iv. 4, "God sent forth his Son, *becoming* of a woman, *becoming* under the law."

Philippians ii. 7, "Who, being in the form of God . . . *became* in the likeness of men."

1 Corinthians xv. 45, "The last Adam *became* a quickening spirit." (In this last instance the verb is carried over grammatically from the first part of the sentence.)

These passages all refer to the entrance into

human life of the eternal Son of God, and they are the only passages in St. Paul's writings which do refer to that birth. Even in the significant reference to the mother of our Lord he does not say "born," but "became." It is not as if St. Paul were unacquainted with the usual expression for birth, for in that same fourth chapter of Galatians he uses it of the two sons of Abraham three times. How St. Paul might have learned the tradition of the virgin birth before it was made public by St. Matthew and St. Luke, is not hard to imagine. St. Luke was constantly with him, and it is fair to suppose that the material which that evangelist used in his Gospel was being gathered over a series of years. The two men were in the closest intimacy. In almost his last written words St. Paul says, "Only Luke is with me." It is hardly conceivable that the writer of the Gospel would not speak of the tradition of the Saviour's birth to the man whom he so revered. To me it seems perfectly manifest that St. Paul knew of the virgin birth and that his belief in the tradition lies behind his unusual choice of words.

This little glance at word usage is probably interesting in itself to many of us, and suggests the way in which St. Paul might subconsciously have adapted his language to the thought of the

virgin birth without having any occasion to refer to that event directly. But the real significance of the matter appears only when we connect his phraseology with the thought that Christ's entrance into human life marks a new beginning in the affairs of men—a thought which St. Paul expresses very clearly. We might put the matter in this way: Could any father, looking on his little son, fail to know that that child is, after all, like himself and all his forefathers, "of the earth, earthy"—that all his life long he will be impeded and weakened by the imperfections of the stock whence he springs? In contrast to this, Christ, says St. Paul, is not of the earth, earthy, but is the Lord from heaven. Or again, can any father expect that the child whom he has begotten will ever be other than a "living soul"—simply human, in all ways, on the same level with all of our race? In contrast with this, Christ, St. Paul declares, was not simply a living soul, but was made a quickening spirit—a source of life. Or again, can any father conceive of the child of his own blood as born to redeem his brother men from sin? In contrast with this, St. Paul tells us that God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law. Or, once more, can

any father imagine his own child as proceeding from a higher order than humanity in order to humble himself in death for the sake of his fellow men? In contrast with this, St. Paul tells us that Christ was in the form of God, but was made in the likeness of men, and became obedient unto death.

If the source of a new life for us all is to be looked for on earth, then, surely, that human life in which the source resides must itself mark a new beginning. The entire constitution of man —body, mind, instincts, feelings—has been damaged by untold generations of selfishness. Our human nature needs a new creative act to endow it with the power which our Saviour had on earth. From the virgin mother He derived all that is essential to our life; but only by a divine act—the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit—could that body and mind and heart which He received from her be quickened in perfection, restored to their primal and intended state, in the image of God. Man's begetting is incapable of such a result.

I might be charged with reading more meaning into the words of St. Paul than is justifiable, though I cannot feel that I misinterpret him. But even so, this fact remains: the "natural man" has been unspeakably impoverished and

weakened by sin—I mean, by the sin of all, by the awful, uninterrrupted course of selfishness throughout the history of our race. We simply cannot expect that in any human birth the malign results of man's long inheritance of evil could be obliterated excepting by a special act of God—a miracle. Not in any way according to the course of nature could a child be born into this world who would be so free of the benumbing oppression of countless centuries of cruelty and wrong as to rise to a new level and offer his own life to all for spiritual strength and immortal, deathless vitality. Of all of this our consciousness amply assures us. We know it. It is the virgin birth of our Saviour, therefore, which makes it possible to think of His human nature as the new thing on earth—the new beginning, the new source, bestowed by God alone.

3. The last of the special truths which we are considering is that our Lord Jesus Christ was and is the divine *person,* the only-begotten Son of God. How does this truth bear upon the virgin birth?

Let us try to put the matter in this way: When any man becomes a father, what is he conscious of begetting? A human child, it will be said, one of his own kind or stock. He is incapable of imagining or desiring as his offspring

a being of any other kind, higher or lower. And, of the child whom he begets we may say that he has from the moment of his birth, at least potentially, everything which is essential to human personality. It is a human *person* that is born, distinct from all other persons, human, angelic, or divine. If we were to say that no human father is capable of begetting other than a human child, I venture to say that none would disagree. If we were to say that no human father is capable of begetting a divine person, we might possibly be charged with invading a field which belongs only to the omnipotence of God; and yet I am confident that we should have the practically unanimous endorsement of all human consciousness. Man is man, and God is God. We were fashioned after the divine likeness, but there can be no confusion between the Creator and the created. The will of the flesh, the will of man, does not aspire to the fathering of the human life of Him from whom all existence flows.

And so when out of the days that had gone so silently there came forth at last from their old Palestinian home the two brief messages, the story of Joseph and the story of Mary, we are justified in supposing that Christians everywhere, as the strange but lovely narratives

reached their ears, realized the truth at once and took it gladly to their hearts: Man did not beget that divine person, their Lord and Saviour, but by the overshadowing power of the Holy Ghost a pure maiden body had enshrined Him in His incarnation. It was not a matter then to enter into the slowly developing theology of the church, to be treated of in apostolic letters. It was just the truth, simply told by those who knew, those who loved Him most.

There are those who would say that the virgin birth of Christ violates the fundamental law of the reproduction of kind. I feel, however, that it is perfectly fair to contend that in one true sense there was no reproduction of kind in the incarnation of the divine person of the Son. Human, He was, it is true; so completely human that St. Paul could use the bold figure of a "self-emptying" to denote His humility in the life He took. And the church has always guarded the reality of His humanity as jealously as the perfection of His divinity. Yet, when we fix our minds upon who it was who came into our restricted life for our salvation, the eternal person, God the Son, we find Him marked off from ourselves in kind so definitely that there can be no confusion of thought. No human father could beget such a child, and only

by the power of the Holy Spirit could a woman become the mother of God in the flesh. It is not a question of the "method" or "mode" by which God the Son came into the world; the virgin birth becomes simply an essential element in the answer to the question: Did God really become incarnate? And it would thus appear not as a miracle greater than the virgin birth itself but as an utterly incomprehensible thing, were we to assert that a man had become the father on earth of the divine person, the Son of God.

Such reasoning as this may appear to some as over-logical. I admit that we are dealing with a great mystery which should be approached only in the utmost faith and with humility of mind. What I here offer has been said, however, often before and in far better form. I offer it now not in a dogmatic spirit, but with the sincere desire of putting into simple expression a thought which may help some to realize the close and intimate connection between the fact of our Saviour's virgin birth and that great truth upon which rest all our hope of salvation, our happiness and wellbeing of soul, the truth of the Incarnation of God the Son.

The effect of a consideration of the three truths of which we have been thinking ought to be cumulative. Each by itself "proves" nothing

at all. All together "prove" nothing. When taken with other matters which we have touched on, the quality of the documents, the inability of critics to explain the story in natural ways, the congruity between the fact related by Joseph and Mary and the basic belief of Christians throughout the history of our religion, then the thoughts which I have suggested ought to come as an aid to our faith. We do not attempt to prove the spiritual truths of religion. The existence of God cannot be established, but only made reasonable, by logical process. It is only faith which can grasp and hold firmly the evidence of things unseen. When, however, we are told that though the virgin birth of our Lord might conceivably be a fact but would have no essential connection with the incarnation, such truths as we have been considering tell us instantly that that cannot be. The connection is there, vital, manifest, and essential. Without it the virgin birth would mean nothing at all—the story would be but a fantastic tale, with no rightful place in Gospel or in creed.

VIII

CREED AND FAITH

THERE ARE A FEW large church bodies which have no creed, but base their standard of belief upon the plain meaning of the New Testament. So far as the doctrine of the virgin birth is concerned, those bodies seem prevailingly to accept it as true, although such a latitude of interpretation of the Gospels is permitted as would appear to leave the door open to a great variety of opinion. It would, however, be quite out of place for me to consider here the wisdom or unwisdom of the policy of such churches. The majority of the Christian bodies, representing probably the vast preponderance of believers in this country, use definite forms of doctrinal expression for the official determination of what must and what must not be publicly taught as essential to the Christian religion. These forms are found in articles of religion, confessions, catechisms, and so forth; but as a brief, terse, and explicit expression of the real essentials,

nothing exists which can compare with the form universally known as the Apostles' Creed. The somewhat older form known as the Nicene Creed is more precise in its declaration of our Lord's divinity; but this creed, although incorporated in the liturgies of the Roman Catholic, Greek, and Episcopal churches, has not the wide acceptance outside of those bodies which the Apostles' Creed is given. This latter may be regarded as a symbol of faith officially recognized by the vast majority of Christians throughout the world.

So far as our subject is concerned, the Apostles' Creed would seem to be perfectly clear. "I believe in . . . Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary." This, then, is a statement of belief in the substantial accuracy of the old Christian tradition contained in St. Matthew and St. Luke, which is in constant use, publicly and officially, by many millions of people in this country at this very time. Can it be regarded as legitimate to use this form of words and at the same time deny the reality of the virgin birth? There are those who maintain that it is legitimate so to do. We cannot question their "honesty," for their frankness in the matter is beyond question. They claim, and ex-

ercise, the privilege of repeating the words of the creed which I have just quoted, in public services, while at the same time they assert that our Lord was the son of Joseph. They regard the words which declare the virgin birth as used in a metaphorical sense, giving them a symbolic interpretation of their own. I cannot explain that interpretation, for I have never been able to discover what it is. But the fact remains that the use of the Apostles' Creed does not necessarily indicate a belief in the virgin birth on the part of some who say it. Those to whom this third article of the creed is an offence point out that there are other articles in the formula which must be taken in other than a literal sense. The whole modern world has moved on to a truer understanding of both natural and supernatural matters. Why should they be singled out and attacked on the score of unconformity, if not intellectual dishonesty, because, forsooth, they extend to the article on the virgin birth the same method of interpretation as is admittedly applied to, say, the article on the descent into hell?

Let us look into this matter and ask whether the practice of such people is legitimate. We are all free to believe as we believe. Formularies and church discipline cannot control private

opinion. But, are we as free, morally, to believe at variance with our expression of belief?

There are twelve articles in the Apostles' Creed. Omitting, for the moment, the article on the virgin birth, of the remaining eleven all but two speak of what we may call divine mysteries —truths, that is, which can be expressed only in the way in which human language, with all its limitations, will ever be able to express thoughts which transcend human understanding —and that is, by such words as best approximate the truth. The standard illustration of this is in the words: "And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." Our Lord used just this phrase. The implication is, obviously, the place of supreme honor in the universe. A literal interpretation is impossible. The first article of all is also worded in this kind of approximate language, necessarily. Hardly any two people think exactly alike as to the creation of heaven and earth; nor is it in the least necessary that they should. The great truth to consider is, that by whatever method, or extending over whatever countless æons of that which we call time, the process of creation is the work of God. So, too, "the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints," involves such thoughts of the spiritual union between Christ and His

followers, such conceptions of human fellowship persisting after death, as to defy full expression in human language. And it is to be noted that a certain degree of individual interpretation is inevitable in connection with whatever assertion we may make of all matters which belong to the purely spiritual realm. With the obvious proviso, therefore, that private interpretation does not contradict the plain intent of any particular article, there is certainly room for men to think in various ways, quite honestly and inevitably, when they repeat the creed.

The two articles which are to be excepted from the above considerations are: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried," and, "The third day he rose again from the dead." In each of these statements, in addition to matters which we cannot comprehend, there is another element which we may call the historic. These articles assert definite events in time. (The same thing is true of the words "He ascended into heaven." But, as I do not want to digress, we may concede that the words *ascended* and *heaven* are both approximate in their meaning. The element of time must be understood.)

In the first of these excepted articles we have nothing but bare historic fact. It asserts the

death of Christ. The name of Pontius Pilate definitely fixes with sufficient closeness the time in the history of the world when all took place. In the second excepted article, the elements of time and event are strongly marked by the words "Third day." In whatever way we may picture to ourselves the nature of the risen body of Christ, we cannot fairly interpret such a statement, as some have done, as meaning a gradual consciousness coming to the disciples of a spiritual presence, a surviving influence, of the Master. It was a definite occurrence, involving an empty tomb and a visible presence, taking place on the third day after death.

Now the question is, can the article on the virgin birth be removed from the category of events in time, the historic category, and find a place in the list of those assertions which deal with matters expressible only in approximate or symbolic language? Must it mean what it says, or may it mean something else?

First, let us look at the matter from the point of view of the words. In the article in question we have the expression "Holy Ghost." It brings to our minds a very definite thought, an intensely sacred thought, the thought of unfathomable divine personality working in the heart and soul of man, the Lord and Giver of

life. But I would point out that this expression, the Holy Ghost, is the only one in the article which does not denote some concrete human idea. "Conceived" in connection with childbirth means only one thing. It is, to be sure, a word of mystery. No biologist can find the secret of the beginning of life in plant, animal, or man. But, in such a connection as we have here, "conceived" denotes a definite physical occurrence in time. It comes in immediate conjunction with the word "born," the name of the child and the name of the mother. It is no more symbolic than the word "crucified." The word "born," of course, denotes nothing here excepting the physical event, the beginning of human existence. It is a most intensely definite word. And lastly, the word "virgin." Can anyone doubt the precise meaning of this word? There are in every language a few priceless words whose meaning is so exact as to be almost startling; and "virgin" is of this kind. Can we play fast and loose with such a word, smirching it with vagueness, robbing it of its age-old rights, twisting it and distorting it until it comes to mean just its opposite? We would not do this in our ordinary thoughts; why, then, when it is joined to a name made holy by long centuries of reverence, the name of Mary the mother of

our Lord? What I contend is that the article on the virgin birth of Christ not only has back of it the overwhelming force of the exact, unequivocal understanding of all Christendom from the beginning, but also, in itself, by its very words, it expresses a thought which the whole world of today, believing and unbelieving, can take in only one possible sense. "Symbolic interpretation" ceases to be legitimate when it leads to the assertion that Christ was born of Mary who was *not* a virgin.

Then again, look at the matter from the point of view of the churches.

The churches which use the Apostles' Creed —churches which, as I have said, represent the vast majority of Christians—have adopted a form of more than fifteen centuries in age to express their fundamental belief. They have thus become, each one within its jurisdiction, trustees of the basic doctrine of antiquity—the Incarnation. Earlier creeds there were than the Apostles'; such as the Old Latin, with its assertion, *Qui natus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine* (Who was born of the Holy Ghost from the Virgin Mary); or the creed of Irenæus, which declared, "The Church believes . . . the birth from a virgin." But even if no such authority and antiquity could be shown, as

readily can be shown, for the substance if not for the form of the Apostles' Creed, that would in no way affect its place in any church which has adopted it as its own standard of faith. It becomes for any such body the official expression of its most fundamental convictions. Its simplicity, terseness, and brevity give it an ascendancy in men's minds over all longer and more complicated forms. Within the limits of its few brief statements there is ample room for liberty of thought and reverent speculation; nor can the ascertainment of great principles at work in the natural world affect in any slightest way the truths which it sets forth, so that the advance of science can proceed to its farthest limits without changing one jot or tittle of its wording. We are sometimes told that those who bind themselves to a literal understanding of ancient creeds which come out of days which knew nothing of modern science must of necessity close their eyes to "new truths." But no new truth affects the things of God. The early church knew just as well as we do that no such thing as a virgin birth occurs in the experience of men. All of the marvelous achievements of research which open to us interminable vistas of the past do not make a divine miracle any less credible or any less possible than the

miracle was in the days of St. Matthew and St. Luke.

The Apostles' Creed, then, is almost the most precious possession of the churches, for it stands for permanency of faith in God. Through it the churches speak to men of things which always have been of chiefest worth in human life, which today have greater influence in the world than any power of which we can think, of things which in the years and centuries to come alone can lead men out of the darkness of error and endless strife into the kingdom of God. Can the churches forsake the faith of our fathers and survive? Can they compound an affirmation and a denial of one and the same thing, bestride the dividing wall of faith and unfaith, giving an uncertain answer to the question, "Was the Son of God really born of a virgin?" Can they take such an attitude and retain the respect of an unbelieving world? We may be sure that whatever of confidence the churches may have forfeited in recent years is not the result of their inability to deliver the Gospel of Jesus Christ in modern terms of science and philosophy, but rather comes from the mistaken attempts of some of their teachers to take out of that Gospel everything which cannot be fathomed by the human

mind. The great Christian bodies of America can command the attention of the most serious thinkers of our day, as well as the allegiance of their members, only by remaining what they were formed to be, guardians of the gates of faith.

One of the greatest of living critics, in commenting upon what he conceived to be St. Paul's total ignorance of the Christ birth tradition, remarks that that Apostle "had much greater things to say concerning the Lord." And I suppose that there are not a few who, like this venerable scholar, feel that the whole subject which I have treated in this little book is unimportant and trifling. The trouble is, however, that, unimportant though it may seem to many, it will not down. The history of Christian thought plainly shows that not only is there a clear, logical connection between the virgin birth and the incarnation, but the two things are so intimately joined together in the teachings of every school of church doctrine that if the latter is to be retained the former cannot be ignored. I mean, broadly speaking, that those who deny the virgin birth always end by so paring away the meaning of our Lord's divinity that He be-

comes at their hands only a man like us all. The theory of adoptionism, as it is called, is brought in to explain His moral greatness. Upon Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph, God bestowed the fullest measure of wisdom and beauty of character; and Jesus responded inwardly to the divine spirit in His heart with such fullness of love and such understanding of God's will, that He was, so to speak, "adopted" as God's representative and interpreter before men. Of course, in such a reconstruction of Christianity much else beside the virgin birth ultimately disappears. There is no place in it for the atoning sacrifice of Christ, or for the resurrection of His body from the tomb. I cannot see where there is room in such a system for prayer to Christ or for any worship of His person. But human beings are variously constituted, and matters which would appear unthinkable to some are perfectly consistent and defensible to others. And so we shall find that modern adoptionists often retain much of the old vesture of religion—prayers and hymns addressed to Christ, sacraments, and even ancient creeds.

Such, then, is the result in experience of an abandonment of the teaching of our Saviour's birth. Let men call the old narratives "fairy tales"; still, they have a potency of their own,

for the truth which they reveal has proved a sure safeguard to the greatest truth of all—that God Himself in person came down into our life in His infinite love and pity. Just as those who deny the virgin birth end by disbelieving this great truth, so those who accept in faith the virgin birth are confident of the Godhead of our Saviour.

The churches cannot ignore such a situation. They must not only stand four-square for the truth of the virgin birth, but also they must guard the assertion of the fact in their profession of belief, for it will always prove to be a strong buttress to what comes first of all, their faith in the divine person of our Lord.

Those of the laity who find it difficult to believe that a maiden could bear a child otherwise than as God's plan has appointed for the human race, should fix their minds resolutely, not on the miracle, but on the eternal person who came down from heaven to live and die among His brothers and to become the Saviour of us all. On that eternal person the hope of all the ends of the world is fixed. If He were no more than one of ourselves, He could not save, however righteous and noble in His living. If He were no more than one of ourselves, He could not be the source of a better life for us,

however strong and wise. We look not to man, but to God Himself to lead us out of the misery of sin and strife. If the virgin birth seems to us unbelievable—and why should it not?—we should ask first, is it believable that God in the person of the eternal Son came to us and took all our nature and lived our life? That is the great question for these modern days and for all time. And faith alone can answer it. I have no fear at all that those who find in this thought the dearest and truest expression of the love of God for men, will also find in the story of the virgin birth the secret of the beginning of the life of God in the form and nature of man.

There is a vast difference between doubt or uncertainty on the one hand, and disbelief or flat denial on the other hand. The full Christian belief is of such a marvelous sort as constantly to suggest queries, often doubts. The most convinced believers often have arrived at assuredness by traveling through dark days of unbelief—and not seldom do doubts come back. The strongest faith is one that has been tested out in the furnace of unanswerable questionings, until it has learned to say, with Augustine of old, "Thou hast made me for Thyself, and my heart will be at unrest until it find rest in Thee." Simply because, in the very nature of

things, an apprehension of what belongs to the divine life of God must be almost beyond our reach, we should not quench our faith by cold showers of reason, or deny ourselves the cheering hope, the strength of heart, or the indescribable peace, which, in their fulness, come only from a real trust in the person of Him who was born of the Virgin Mary, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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